

CHAPTER 3

STARTING THE JOURNEY

RATHER APPREHENSIVELY, all the children agreed to attempt the task Jasmi had described. After that, the conversation turned to what route they should take to reach World's End. Micon and the Sage discussed whether it would be better to sail or travel by land and apparently decided that a mixture of both would be the best plan. Jasmi pointed out that they would most certainly have to walk the last part of the journey, because they would have to avoid something she called the Maelstrom, and immediately all three of them started a debate on whether it was safer to travel through the Deep Forest or along the fringes of Far Beyond.

None of the children could quite follow what was going on, as they did not know much about any of the places under discussion. They listened as politely as they could for a long while, but then they started to shift uncomfortably on the hard rock floor. The inside of the cave grew quite dark as the sunlight slowly faded, and at last Jasmi glanced at the children. She laughed gently.

"I think we've talked enough," she said to her father and the Sage. "Look at the children! They're all tired and hungry – and look how dark it is now!"

Micon nodded in agreement. He went to the cave entrance where he had left a bundle of what turned out to be a large quantity of sandwiches and fruit. The Sage waved a finger at a pile of sticks in the middle of the cave, and they immediately burst into flames. The cheery fire not only drove out the shadows of the evening but also warmed everybody up, as the evening air had become quite chill. Toby blinked in astonishment and was finally convinced that magic was real, at least in Within.

As everyone ate their fill, Micon explained that the first thing to do on the following day would be to go back to the beach of the Sunlit Sea where a ship was waiting for them.

"It's not very far to the beach," said Jasmi, "but I think you'll find the trip interesting."

Mary looked nervous.

“I said ‘interesting’, not ‘dangerous,’” smiled Jasmi, but refused to say any more. She just continued to smile in rather an infuriating way, and all she would say in answer to the children’s questions was “wait until tomorrow. You’ll see.” Finally they gave up and lapsed into a grumpy silence.

“Where are we sailing to, anyway?” asked Pamela suddenly.

“First of all, to the In Betweens,” said Micon. “We will have to arrange an expedition once we get there. You can’t just head off to a place like World’s End without making certain arrangements. Like who is going to protect you, for example.”

“Aren’t you coming with us?” said Mary.

“Possibly,” answered Micon. “That depends on quite a few things, including what route the expedition takes after leaving the In Betweens. But even if I go with you, I shan’t be able to protect you against everything. What happens if the party gets split up, for one thing? I can’t be in two places at once.”

“Who is going to come with us, then?” demanded Pamela.

Micon shrugged.

“We’ll have to see who we can find. The first thing to do is get back to the ship and sail to Marbellum, and then we’ll just take things from there.”

“Marbellum?” said Stephen. “That’s not a very nice place, is it? I remember Guelph told us that last time we were here.”

“No, it’s not exactly safe,” replied Micon. “Or at least, it wouldn’t be if you were on your own. However, if anyone tries anything while Jasmi and I are there.....”

He let the sentence tail off into silence, and in spite of his soft voice and friendly smile, the children shivered. Suddenly, they were all glad that Micon was on their side and not against them.

The Sage spoke up with a suggestion that since it was getting late and they had a long trip ahead of them, they should settle down for the night and get some rest. Everyone agreed, so he went to a dark part of the cave for a minute and returned with a pile of blankets. Soon after, everybody had made themselves comfortable, and the Sage waved a finger at the fire again. At first nothing seemed to happen but then, although the flames burned as fiercely as before and certainly were just as warm, the fire faded slightly, and was not so bright. The cave became quite dark and the children realised that the Sage, in rather an unusual fashion, was turning down the light so that they could go to sleep more easily. It was a strange piece of

magic, and Micon raised his eyebrows with surprise. Of course, the Sage noticed that straight away, and in spite of the fact that he was such a powerful and important Magician, he could not help looking pleased with himself.

For a long time after they had settled down, Toby lay thinking about the series of events which had brought him into Within. He remembered the long trip up to Scotland and how he had met up with Stephen and the girls. Already that seemed ages ago, but it was only that very afternoon! He remembered the meal at Grandmother Mae's, and his unfortunate remark about snow in Wales; he felt himself going red as it all came back to him. He had not even believed the others when they had told him about Within, and yet here he was, snug in a cave with two Magicians and the Sage, who was just as the others had described.

"Stephen, are you awake?" he whispered.

There was a pause, then the sound of someone shifting about.

"Only just," replied Stephen in a sleepy voice. "What do you want?"

"Er...humphh!" Toby nearly swallowed his words, but carried on bravely.

"Er...to say I'm sorry," he said. "I was being, er....stupid back in Scotland, wasn't I?"

"Well...." began Stephen. He sounded more awake, but was at a loss for words.

"Yes," came Pamela's voice from a little further away. "We were thoroughly fed up with you."

"Well, I am sorry," repeated Toby. "I was nervous, that's all."

"Nervous?" asked Stephen. "What was there to be nervous about?"

"You lot, of course," said Toby. "There's three of you, and only one of me, and I'd never been to Scotland before."

There was another pause, then Pamela whispered again from across the cave.

"We never thought of that," she admitted. "Perhaps we should have seen that you were nervous."

"Is it all right, then?" asked Toby.

"Yes," said Stephen. "We can all be friends now, which is just as well if we've got to travel half way across Within together."

“Thanks,” said Toby in a relieved voice. “I suppose we’d better go to sleep now, hadn’t we?”

“Yes,” said Pamela. “Goodnight.”

They all said goodnight and settled down again, and were just beginning to drift off to sleep when Mary whispered from her part of the cave.

“Toby?”

“Yes?” he said. “I thought you were sleep.”

“No, I was listening,” replied Mary. “Back home in Wales, do you really have a staircase bigger than the Front Stairs?”

Even though it was dark, Toby knew that the other two were also waiting for his answer.

“No,” he said, suppressing a grin. “No, we live in a bungalow and don’t have any stairs at all!”

Mary giggled quietly, and Toby heard Stephen make a snorting noise as he tried not to laugh. Then, feeling that everything was all right at last, the children finally settled down and went to sleep.

The next day dawned bright and clear, although outside the cave it was quite cold as the sun had not yet warmed up the mountain air. Micon and Jasmi seemed in a hurry, so after a quick breakfast they all said goodbye to the Sage and started off along the rocky path which led down steeply from the cave entrance.

“Keep in touch!” called the Sage.

“We’ll do our best!” shouted back Jasmi.

The Sage disappeared from view behind a large boulder as the path turned sharply along the base of a rocky wall. Some yards further on was an opening in the wall which seemed to lead out into the clear blue sky.

“What did all that mean?” asked Stephen. “Surely the Sage and Micon could contact each other by magic even if they were ever such a long way apart?”

“I’m sure they could,” said Jasmi in a stiff sort of voice. “So could I, actually.”

“Now, Jasmi, you know that’s not what Stephen meant,” reproved Micon.

“No, I suppose not,” said Jasmi, although she still looked cross. She stepped over a hole in the rock and glanced across at Stephen. “Well, normally there wouldn’t be any problem about

reaching the Sage, especially if he knew we were trying to, but at the moment there seems to be some sort of interference.”

Stephen looked from Jasmi to Micon, puzzled.

“It would appear,” said the Magician, “that some of the half-men have learned a little magic. Not much, just enough to make it difficult for us to use the speaking magic. Not only that.....”

Micon broke off as Toby suddenly gave a wild yell and came rushing back up the path.

“Run!” he shouted. “It’s a tidal wave!”

Instead of being frightened, they all burst out laughing and Pamela grabbed at his arm as he scrambled past.

“Wait a minute,” she said. “It’s all right, it’s not a tidal wave. Come and see.”

Toby struggled for a moment and then allowed himself to be guided back to the opening in the rock wall. Stephen, Micon and Jasmi had already gone through, and Mary was just following. Reluctantly, Toby peered round the edge of the rocks and his eyes opened wide with fear.

“Don’t panic,” said Pamela. “Don’t you remember what we said about Within being on the inside? Everything slopes up, including the sea. That’s not a tidal wave, it’s the Sunlit Sea!”

Slowly, Toby realised that Pamela was right and there was, after all, no danger in what appeared to be a tremendous wall of water.

“Don’t worry, we all ran off when we first saw it,” said Pamela reassuringly. “It just takes a while to get used to it, that’s all.”

Toby gave a weak grin and followed the others out onto a broad, rocky plain. Micon had walked on quite a long way in front, but had stopped and was waiting for them to catch up.

“Look, that must be the ship,” added Pamela, pointing. Still feeling rather queasy at the sight of the Sunlit Sea rearing up above him, Toby looked where she indicated and saw a narrow strip of beach. The sun glinted off waves as they rolled in towards the shore, and about a hundred yards out to sea floated a tall sailing ship with all its sails neatly furled.

Toby could see it perfectly even though it was still a long distance ahead of them, and he wondered if that was because the air was very clear or because Within sloped upwards in all directions.

He shook his head and decided not to look at the curving sea until he had got thoroughly used to the idea.

By now, they had caught up with Micon, and the reason why he had come to a stop soon became obvious. The expanse of rock on which they all stood came to a sudden end about ten yards further on, and a sheer cliff dropped down a long way to another rocky area below.

“We must be a bit early,” said Micon.

“Early for what?” asked Pamela, but even as she spoke there came a loud noise from away to their right which became even louder as it moved towards them. Micon and Jasmi appeared quite unconcerned, so the children stayed where they were, although they all looked fearfully in the direction that the sounds were coming from. Louder and louder, the thundering kept coming closer, and just as the very rocks began to tremble and sway, a vast shape came into sight around the curve of the mountains. Even though it was walking on the ground at the foot of the cliff, it towered so high that everyone was looking straight up by the time it reached them.

“A giant!” gasped Pamela, her voice almost lost in the echoing footfalls of the huge shape.

“That’s right,” grinned Jasmi. “I told you the trip to the beach might prove interesting, didn’t I?”

The giant crashed to a halt by the side of the waiting group and its enormous face beamed down at them. All of its teeth seemed to be crooked, and its nose slanted off to one side, and its hair stuck out in all sorts of strange directions, but even so nobody could resist smiling back up at that happy grin.

“Oooooaarghh murmphh!” bellowed the giant.

Micon waved his arms in the air, and the giant immediately placed a gigantic hand, palm upwards, on the top of the cliff.

“Come on!” called Jasmi. She went over to the hand and started to climb up onto it. The children suddenly understood that the giant was there to help them down the cliff, and hurried after her. Stephen and Pamela scrambled up first, and then turned to help Mary and Toby, because the hand was so thick that it was like climbing onto a fairly high table.

“Eeeeearry!” boomed the giant. Micon waved his arms again, and made sure that everyone was standing in the middle of the giant’s hand.

“Here we go!” he called.

The giant lifted its arm a little way and swung it out over the edge of the cliff. Mary clung onto the others as the ground came into view far beneath them, and the face of the cliff rushed past at a dizzying rate. The giant bent and thumped its hand down on the ground. It probably thought it was being quite gentle, but everybody staggered and Toby did in fact sit down quite hard. It was like falling onto a piece of wood.

“Off we get,” ordered Micon.

Seconds later they were all standing around looking up at the giant, which seemed even taller now that they were no longer on the cliff top.

“Rrrraaxnn!” roared the giant. Very carefully, it picked up one of its feet and started to walk directly away from the cliff. Once it was safely clear of its passengers it speeded up and was soon a hundred yards away.

“Where’s it going?” asked Toby.

“Same place as we are,” replied Jasmi. She started off after the giant. “There are two cliffs to get past, and it is going to help us down the second one as well.”

Mary and the twins remembered that the last time they were in Within they had encountered the two cliffs, but had only managed to climb up the first one. Jasmi seemed to read their thoughts.

“The cave we found when you were here before, Morgoda’s cave, is way over there somewhere.” She waved an arm off to the left. “We were lucky not to meet the giant that time,” she added. “It might not have been so friendly towards people it didn’t know.”

“How does it know us this time?” asked Stephen.

“It serves the Sage,” said Micon. “He gave it instructions some days ago. That’s why we were in such a hurry this morning. If we had not been on time it would probably have just wandered off somewhere.”

“Aaarghleeem!” bellowed the giant in the distance. As they watched, it sat down rather clumsily, poked its legs out over the second cliff, and jumped down. A terrific crash echoed all round the mountains as it disappeared from view. After a few seconds a cloud of dust rose into the air, followed by the giant itself as it stood upright again. Even from fifty yards away they could see that it was still beaming happily.

“Urrrup!” it boomed.

“Can’t it speak properly?” asked Pamela.

“It *is* speaking properly,” replied Jasmi. “Only its voice is so loud that we can’t make sense of what it says. It can’t hear us, either,” she added. “That’s why father uses sign language when he wants to say anything.”

By this time they had reached the edge of the second cliff. The giant already had its hand placed on the ground in the same way as before, and was waiting patiently. Without needing to be told this time, the children clambered onto the centre of its palm and stood with Micon and Jasmi as they were whisked into the air. It turned out that the second cliff was not quite as high as the first one, so it took them less time to reach the bottom and none of them felt quite so dizzy. They jumped back onto solid ground, and the giant straightened to its full height.

“Stand clear!” shouted Micon urgently.

They all ran quickly towards the beach, then stopped to watch the giant. It had turned back to face the cliff, and as they looked, it heaved itself back up again. Its feet scabbled for a hold, and huge rocks bounced down onto the ground where they had all been standing only moments ago. Then, with a tremendous thrust, the giant propelled itself back up on top of the cliff, where it stood up and looked gigantic and impressive against the morning sky.

It waved at them and roared something unintelligible, and they all waved back. Then it turned away and, with a sound like thunder decreasing in the distance, disappeared from view.

“Phew!” gasped Toby. Micon smiled at him.

“I wouldn’t want to do that too often,” he admitted. “Giants are friendly as a rule, but they could easily tread on you by accident, and it wouldn’t really matter if they meant it or not!”

“What’s its name?” asked Mary.

“Giants don’t have names,” said Jasmi. “There are hardly any of them in Within, and nobody can talk to them anyway, so why should they have names?”

“The Sage must be able to talk to them,” protested Pamela.

“That’s true,” admitted Jasmi. “Perhaps he knows their names....but what the Sage does and what ordinary people do are two different things!”

They were walking across the beach by now, and as they neared the sea, a small boat pushed away from the sailing ship and started towards them. As it came closer, the children stared at it in

amazement, because it seemed to be completely empty: it was moving on its own!

Micon chuckled.

“The Sage isn’t the only one who knows magic,” he said.

“You’re just showing off, father!” scolded Jasmi. “Don’t pay any attention to him,” she instructed. “There are plenty of sailors on board who could have brought the boat in to the beach!”

Micon was quite unaffected by this rebuke, and grinned broadly as they all clambered into the little boat. Again it moved off without any apparent source of power, this time towards the open sea. Micon continued to grin, Jasmi frowned, and the children stared at the sailing ship which, as it turned out, was to be their home for the next three weeks.