

CHAPTER 16 - THE TOP OF THE GREAT DOME

Cap'n Bill's heart was beating pretty vast, but he did not let Zog know that. Trot was so sure of the protection of the fairy mermaids that she would not allow herself to become frightened. Aquareine and Clia were as calm as if nothing had happened.

"Please excuse this little interruption," said Zog. "I knew very well the marble blocks would not hurt you. But the play is over for a time. You may now retire to your rooms, and when I again invite you to my presence, I shall have found some better ways to entertain you."

Without reply to this threat, they turned and followed Sacho from the hall, and the boy led them straight back to their own rooms.

"Zog is making a great mistake," said Sacho with a laugh. "He has no time for vengeance, but the great magician does not know that."

"What is he trying to do, anyway?" asked Trot.

"He does not tell me all his secrets, but I've an idea he wants to kill you," replied Sacho. "How absurd it is to be plotting such a thing when he might spend his time in laughing and being jolly! Isn't it, now?"

"Zog is a wicked, wicked creature!" exclaimed Trot.

"But he had his good points," replied Sacho cheerfully. "There is no one about in the world so bad that there is nothing good about him."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Cap'n Bill. "What are Zog's good points?"

"All his slaves were saved from drowning, and he is kind to them," said Sacho.

"That is merely the kindness of selfishness," said Aquareine. "Tell me, my lad, is the opening in the great dome outside guarded?"

"Yes indeed," was the reply. "You cannot hope to escape in that way, for the prince of the sea devils, who is the largest and fiercest of his race, lies crouched over the opening night and day, and none can pass his network of curling legs."

"Is there no avenue that is not guarded?" continued Aquareine.

"None at all, your Majesty. Zog is always careful to be well guarded, for he fears the approach of an enemy. What this enemy can be to terrify the great magician I do not know, but Zog is always afraid and never leaves an entrance unguarded."

Besides, it is an enchanted castle, you know, and none in the ocean can see it unless Zog wishes him to. So it will be very hard for his enemy to find him."

"We wish to escape," said Clia. "Will you help us, Sacho?"

"In any way I can," replied the boy.

"If we succeed, we will take you with us," continued the Princess.

But Sacho shook his head and laughed. "I would indeed like to see you escape Zog's vengeance," said he, "for vengeance is wrong, and you are too pretty and too good to be destroyed. But I am happy here and have no wish to go away, having no other home or friends other than my fellow slaves."

Then he left them, and when they were again alone, Aquareine said, "We were able to escape Zog's attacks today, but I am quite sure he will plan more powerful ways to destroy us. He has shown that he knows some clever magic, and perhaps I shall not be able to foil it. So it will be well for us to escape tonight if possible."

"Can you fight and conquer the big sea devil up in the dome?" asked Trot.

The queen was thoughtful, and did not reply to this question at once. But Cap'n Bill said uneasily, "I can't abide them devil critters, an' I hopes, for my part, we won't be called on to tackle 'em. You see, Trot, we're in consider'ble of a bad mess, an' if we ever live to tell the tale--"

"Why not, Cap'n?" asked the child. "We're safe enough so far. Can't you trust our good friend, the queen?"

"She don't seem plumb sure o' things herself," remarked the sailor. "The mermaids is all right an' friendly, mate, but this 'ere magic maker, ol' Zog, is a bad one, out 'n' out, an' means to kill us if he can."

"But he can't!" cried Trot bravely.

"I hope you're right, dear. I wouldn't want to bet on Zog's chances jes' yet, an' at the same time it would be riskin' money to bet on our chances. Seems to me it's a case of luck which wins."

"Don't worry, friend," said the Queen. "I have a plan to save us. Let us wait patiently until nightfall." They waited in the Rose Chamber a long time, talking earnestly together, but the brilliant light that flooded both the room and the great dome outside did not fade in the least. After several hours had passed away, the gong sounded and Tom Atto again appeared, followed by four slaves bearing many golden dishes upon silver trays. The friendly cook had prepared a fine dinner, and they were all glad to find that, whatever Zog intended to do to them,

he had no intention of starving them. Perhaps the magician realized that Aquareine's fairy powers, if put to the test, would be able to provide food for her companions, but whatever his object may have been, their enemy had given them splendid rooms and plenty to eat.

"Isn't it nearly nighttime?" asked the Queen as Tom Atto spread the table with a cloth of woven seaweed and directed his men to place the dishes upon it.

"Night!" he exclaimed as if surprised. "There is no night here."

"Doesn't it ever get dark?" inquired Trot.

"Never. We know nothing of the passage of time or of day or night. The light always shines just as you see it now, and we sleep whenever we are tired and rise again as soon as we are rested."

"What causes the light?" Princess Clia asked.

"It's magic, your Highness," said the cook solemnly. "It's one of the curious things Zog is able to do. But you must remember all this place is a big cave in which the castle stands, so the light is never seen by anyone except those who live here."

"But why does Zog keep his light going all the time?" asked the Queen.

"I suppose it is because he himself never sleeps," replied Tom Atto. "They say the master hasn't slept for hundreds of years, not since Anko, the sea serpent, defeated him and drove him into this place."

They asked no more questions and began to eat their dinner in silence. Before long, Cap'n Joe came in to visit his brother and took a seat at the table with the prisoners. He proved a jolly fellow, and when he and Cap'n Bill talked about their boyhood days, the stories were so funny that everybody laughed and for a time forgot their worries.

When dinner was over, however, and Cap'n Joe had gone back to his work of sewing on buttons and the servants had carried away the dishes, the prisoners remembered their troubles and the fate that awaited them. "I am much disappointed," said the Queen, "to find there is no night here and that Zog never sleeps. It will make our escape more difficult. Yet we must make the attempt, and as we are tired and a great struggle is before us, it will be best for us to sleep and refresh ourselves."

They agreed to this, for the day had been long and adventurous, so Cap'n Bill kissed Trot and went in to the Peony Room, where he lay down upon his spongy couch and fell fast asleep. The mermaids and Trot followed this example, and I

think none of them was much worried, after all, because they quickly sank into peaceful slumber and forgot all the dangers that threatened them.