

# Jimmy Crikey's Adventures in The Emerald Lake

Wallace E Briggs

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## DEDICATION

The support and assistance freely provided by Pat, my long loving wife, and Denise, my live-in sister-in-law, is greatly appreciated. Their encouragement picks me up so many times when things get complicated



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The contributions of my editor Vanessa Curtis are invaluable in helping to bring another adventure of JIMMY Crikey to market in a presentable story. I explore her every suggestion knowing that it was a true professional who made the observation.



# **Jimmy Crikey's Adventures in the Emerald Lake (and Extinct Volcanoes)**

## **Chapter 1**

Mr McDonald did not stir a centimetre despite the incessant knocking at the door.

Jimmy and Amanda answered it together in their dressing gowns. The morning air was cool and brought pimples up on their arms and legs, but no one was there when they opened the door.

"We didn't both imagine it," Amanda said, drawing the nightgown tighter around her waist. Jimmy stepped outside

and looked all around. "There's no one anywhere near, Amanda."

"Well, someone was making a lot of noise knocking on the door. If there's no one there, either Roombelow's children are getting naughtier, or it is one of the witches trying to attract your attention."

"If it were one of the witches, there would be a message of some sorts," Jimmy said. "I have never known the children play such pranks, especially this early in the day."

"Well, it's a bit too chilly around the ankles to stand here debating the matter," Amanda said, and she closed their door behind them. "Put a log on the fire, Jimmy, and I'll make a start on breakfast."

Amanda busied herself in the kitchen, and Jimmy stirred some life into the hot embers with the poker and then laid a log onto the glowing embers. He lifted one end of the log with the poker and balanced it until the air carried the virgin flames around the new fuel supply. Just as the flames were reaching high, the knocking at the door began again.



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Without a moment's thought, Jimmy flung himself at the door, determined to catch whoever was playing such silly games. Once again, the street was devoid of life. No one else was around. He returned to the fireside as Amanda leaned into the sitting room to learn who was at the door. "No one there again?"

"Your thought that it could be witch trying to attract attention must be right, Amanda. But it is so unusual for there not to be a message. I'll have to run up the hill to see what's happening at Matilda's house. The chances are that it's another spell gone wrong for Jade."

"You're going nowhere, young man. Not until you've had some breakfast. Toast and a boiled egg coming up in just a minute."

Jimmy knew better than to argue. "Thanks, Amanda. The kettle's almost boiling. I'll lay the table. Shall I put some cutlery out for Mr McDonald?"

“I don't think he'll surface any time soon, Jimmy. Council business always takes it out of him these days. He forgets that he's not a young man anymore.”

Jimmy washed and dressed in record time and was sat at the table ready for breakfast just as Amanda poured out a hot cup of tea. “Don't bolt your breakfast, Jimmy. You'll be in much better shape to face the world when you have some food in your stomach but not if it is still churning around.”

Amanda joined Jimmy but only had a cup of tea in her hand. “I'll have my breakfast when Mr McDonald joins us in the land of the living.” She smiled and told Jimmy, “Take care of yourself. Hope all goes well.”

“Thanks, Amanda. See you and Mr McDonald a bit later.”

The door swung closed behind him, and in the blink of an eye, Jimmy's red Attalian boots carried him up the hill to Matilda's front door.

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Witch Matilda greeted her friend. "How nice to see you, Jimmy. Up and about early this morning. Jade isn't up yet, but I don't think she'll be long when she knows you're here.

"Jade," she called up the stairs. "Jimmy's arrived. Are you awake yet?"

There was no reply. "Make yourself at home, Jimmy," she said. "Say hello to Beatrix while I check on Jade,"

Beatrix was always pleased to see Jimmy. He had the knack of scratching behind her ears at just the correct position to ease the itch. Her heavy purring was deafening. Matilda's footsteps returned down the stairs, and she stood in front of Jimmy. "She's not there, Jimmy, and it doesn't look as though she has slept in her bed. Jade never leaves the house without telling me where she's going."

It was a mystery that defeated Matilda's skills at divination. Unusually her senses picked up no trace of her mini apprentice. Jade was the niece of Gemma, the little lady Diamite. The Diamites were small people who lived in the cave world of Lithnia and Jade was blessed with a smidgeon

of witchcraft in her veins. Chief of the witches, Matilda, detected her hidden ability and offered to train her in the ancient arts.

Jade's education in the mysterious world of witchcraft was proceeding quickly, and Matilda was pleased with her progress. A few minor problems arose, teaching such a young pupil the intricacies of magic. Jade was prone to making slight errors, and it was not unusual to find strange beasts and tropical animals running around Matilda's home. Anywhere Jade happened to be when the magic mistakes crept in.

"Matilda," Jimmy offered his opinion, "These smells of a Jade spell gone wrong. I am now certain that it was Jade who was beating on Mr McDonald's door early this morning."

"Something's not quite right here," Matilda said. "Yesterday, I know that she was practising using the cloak of invisibility, but usually, being invisible leaves you with power to communicate. Especially with one of her sisters."

"There were no sounds from her this morning and no words floating in my head. But if she was banging on Mr

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McDonald's front door, why is she not trying to knock on your door to let us know she's here?"

At that point, it dawned on Matilda. "She's not just invisible. She has managed to dematerialise in the same region in which she cast the spell."

"So, she can only move physical objects when she is outside of your house?"

"That's what it looks like, Jimmy. Let's walk down the hill a little way and hope that Jade will be able to let us know that she's with us. If I know exactly where she is, I may be able to reverse the spell."

Jimmy and Matilda walked halfway down the hill, and Matilda asked Jade, "If you are close, move something to let us know you're here."

The long branches of a nearby shrub began violently shaking. "I suppose that means you're with us?" Matilda asked. And the shrub shook again. "Right!" Matilda said. "Stay in touch with bush, Jade. It may take me a moment or two to recall the exact structure of this spell. You appear to have

called up a magic spell beyond my experience. Even I may not get it right the first time.”

Matilda closed her eyes and lifted her head high. The spell she uttered was in a language that Jimmy had never heard before. It was more like a continuous wailing note, the pitch of which rose and fell in a sinusoidal wave. Her wand appeared in her hand, and she moved it like a conductor's baton, up and down as the tuneless notes circled the room.

The wand left Matilda's hand and rose high into the air with musical notes visibly falling from its tip. Matilda's voice was an octave above the notes that the wand emitted. The result was not harmonical. Discordance filled the air, and out of the disturbed air appeared a faint trace of a little girl. Jade was wide-eyed and tearful but not quite all there. Only her upper body was visible. The rest of her was invisible. Her cries were silent. She still could not be heard.

Her eyes were tightly focussed on Matilda, filled with pleading for the magic to succeed.

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Matilda crumbled to the floor in a heap and Jade disappeared. “Matilda,” Jimmy shouted, close to panic as he attempted to pick up the witch. But there was nothing there. His hands passed right on through what appeared to be Matilda’s crumpled form.

“Don’t worry, Jimmy. I’m still here -just a glitch in the spell. I haven’t used it for many years, and I’m not as strong as I used to be. Give a glass of my nectar, and I’ll try again.”

Jimmy ran back into Matilda’s home and reached up into the ever-present fudge of smoke that hung over the kitchen table and brought down a clean glass beaker. The next item he grasped was a carafe of a golden liquid. Jimmy poured half a glass full into the tumbler and hurried back down the hill. He passed the glass to Matilda, who had managed to move into a sitting position. The nectar disappeared, almost in a single gulp.

Within seconds Matilda had pulled herself to her feet using Jimmy’s leg as a frame and recovered to standing unaided. “This is no good, Jade. We need to get back into the

house. I need to recover my strength and check the spell before trying again. Come, let me lean on your arm, Jimmy. I'll be fine in a few moments, and then we'll try again. Don't worry, Jade. We'll soon have you back. Let's back inside, out of this morning's chilled air."

And all three walked back up the hill to the witch's house. It may have looked as if there were only two people, but Jade was with them every step, wondering what she had done wrong, this time.



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## Chapter 2

**M**atilda had to sit down at the kitchen table while recovering her breath from her exertion. She had another glass of amber liquid and appeared to perk up. Jimmy was greatly relieved.

“What can I do to help, Matilda?”

“Firstly, I need a particular book of spells’ It’s the big red one on the second shelf. Take care, Jimmy. It’s old and cumbersome with the weight of ancient spells. Whatever you do, please don’t drop it. If it hits the floor, it will go straight through the floorboards, and it may not stop when it hits the ground below us.”

“Bring it to me,” Matilda requested. It was undoubtedly a heavy tome. Jimmy’s knees threatened to buckle under the load, but he made it to the kitchen table and laid it as gently as he could in front of the witch. Matilda effortlessly spun the

book towards herself and unclasped the metal bar that locked the book covers. Her eyes scanned each page in a single glance as she turned the pages so fast they blurred. She reached the last page and paused.

“I must be looking for the wrong spell. I was certain it was in the red book.” Matilda stood up from the kitchen stool and wandered around her sitting room and kitchen and work space, muttering undecipherable words into the air. Her head hung low. Jimmy dared not interrupt her cogitations, which continued for a moment or two before she lifted her head and her eyes had turned a fluorescent green. “It’s here, Jimmy! It’s here!”

The red book rose off the table and flipped over, thudding back onto the tabletop. Matilda pointed her wand, and the pages turned themselves in the wind that seemed to have come from nowhere. Every loose piece of paper in the house joined in, dancing in the wind. The air current flowed from the tip of Matilda’s jewel-encrusted wand. It stopped just as suddenly as it had started, and the book lay open.

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Matilda brought the book closer to her and the glasses, parked atop her head, slid down onto the bridge of her nose. “It was here, all the time, Jimmy. I was just going too fast to spot it.”

“What happens now, Matilda?” Jimmy asked.

“Just stand well back and watch the power of the witches at work, Jimmy.

“Jade, I need to know exactly where you are. Perch yourself on this stool as soon as I vacate it.”

Matilda moved back, and, unseen, Jade took her spot. The stool rocked ever so slightly as she climbed onto the wooden seat. Jimmy had no desire to get caught up in another spell. He moved back until he was pressed against the cold stone outer wall of the witch’s house.

The heavy oak table was pushed aside by the intense whirlwind to the very edge of the room, but the stool carrying an invisible Jade was untouched by the force of the wind. The wind circled Jade and the stool. Matilda called the names of the primary witches of Earth’s coven. The first to appear was

the fudged outline of Floella, guardian of Earth's substance, followed by the blue robes of Elwin, guardian of all waters on Earth. Finally, Ira added her being to the swirling air and the sky guardian added the might of her magic to Matilda's.

The non-musical cacophony started in a low register and rose in pitch as each witch added her unique contribution to Matilda's keening note. The most potent force on Earth encircled Jade. That of four witches acting in unison. The witches combined chorus of audible energy rose in pitch, and at last, Jade became partially visible. The whirlwind picked her up and spun her through the air. Her eyes were tightly closed, but she could not close her ears to the wall of noise that rose even higher in pitch until her hearing hurt.

Jimmy saw the coloured beams emerging from the four wands at some unknown signal. The beams were carried around Jade as if the wind was directing them. Jade screamed as the brightness of light and intensity of sound pervaded her every particle of being.

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Contrasting coloured symbols of the magical arts decorated Matilda's black robe. The characters took on a metallic sheen and danced around the black robe like demented demons, resonating with the powerful spell.

The crescendo of light and sound reached a feverish pitch, Matilda shrieked the sounds, indeed not the words, of her spell and the whole house trembled as Jade stepped out of the rotating melee, as cool and calm as if she had been out for a Sunday morning stroll.

"I'm back," she yelled at Matilda.

Matilda was still lost in a trance, and her three acolytes recovered long before she did.

Sound levels dropped seventy decibels almost instantaneously. Matilda started sinking to the floor, but Floella and Ira each took an arm and helped her sit in front of the fire.

"Is she all right?" Jade asked tearfully.

"She just needs to rest for a few minutes, Jade," Floella replied. But they were all more worried than they allowed themselves to show.

“Will everyone stop twittering,” Matilda opened her eyes. “I’m fine, just a little exhausted after channelling all that energy to pull Jade back to this world. We couldn’t possibly have left her in the blackness of the void for much longer. Thank you all for sharing your powers with me for a few minutes. I would never have managed on my own”

“That’s what the sisterhood is for,” added Elwinn. “You may be our leader, but we are all here to support each other.” Matilda managed to croak a reply.” What I need at the moment, more than anything else, is a brew of black mushroom juice, Elwinn. There’s a bottle above the mantle shelf which should be at least half full.”

Floella checked out the various bottles on the shelf above the fireplace. “It should be last on the right,” Matilda pointed out. “Got it, Matilda. But there isn’t much left in the bottle.”

“However much is left will have to do until I can get some more. Just heat it a little in that pan. I’m sure that will help me recover.”

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Floella poured the remaining liquid into a small cast iron pan, placed it on a trivet and swung it over the flames. The vile smell intensified as the fluid rapidly heated. She poured what amounted to half a wine glass of brew and passed it to Matilda, who drained it in a single gulp. "Thank you, Floella. I'll be fine in a moment. But it looks like I'll have to replenish my stock very soon."

"Don't worry about that, Matilda," Jimmy intervened. "I know where the mushrooms grow. They are in the upper world: in the centre of the circle of crooked oak trees in the forest near Esh. I've been there before for you. You will have a sackful before lunchtime tomorrow."

"I'll help, Jimmy," Jade added.

"I don't think you'll have much time tomorrow, Jade," Matilda said. "I think we need to practice a certain spell until we get it right."

"You're not going to let her try again, Matilda?" Jimmy pleaded. "Jade will never conquer the ritual of spells without daily practice," Matilda pointed out.

"We all went through the same trials," Floella said.

"The road to becoming a sister is not an easy one," Elwin concurred. "But I must admit, Jimmy, I would rather not be around until Jade has earned her wand."

"That's not like you, Elwin," Matilda spoke out in support of Jade. "Jade is the youngest witch I have ever had the pleasure of introducing into our secret arts. We should forgive a mistake or two along the way, and we should support her efforts."

"Oh, Jade! Of course, I applaud your learning and your growing skills," Elwin apologised. "I am sorry if I offended you. You are the most precious member of the sisterhood because of your youth. We are all getting long in the tooth, and our existing circle will not last forever. We must have new blood to keep the circle intact, to be ready to face any new challenges that may come Earth's way."

"Thank you, Elwin," Jade acknowledged the apology that Elwin had made. "I will double my efforts to learn the crafts."



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“And once you pass the final test, the collected wisdom of our superiors will decide which realm you will be assigned to,” Matilda announced.

“Do I not have a choice?” Jade asked.

“You may state a preference, but the final choice is not even in our hands,” Floella explained.

Matilda continued. “There will be a confluence of all of Earth’s spirits, past and present. Whatever they decree, shall be.”

Like Jade, Jimmy had thought that Matilda would have the final say, but even higher authorities within the circle would determine Jade’s future at some future point in time.

## Chapter 3

The witches dispersed, happy to have contributed their magic to support their leader. They left Jade and Jimmy to watch over Matilda as she rapidly regained strength.

“That must be a potent brew, Matilda. You have recovered so quickly,” Jade observed.

“It may be a foul-smelling concoction, but it keeps me going when I feel a little under the weather,” Matilda smiled. “You won’t need it for a good few years yet, Jade.”

“I’ll collect the mushrooms first thing in the morning, Matilda,” Jimmy confirmed. “I could go this very moment if you say you need them now.” “No, I assure you, Jimmy. There was just sufficient left in the bottle to give quite a ‘pick-me-up’ which will last until at least tomorrow evening.” Matilda

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smiled her thanks. "Should I collect twice as many as I gathered the last time?" Jimmy asked. "It seems that you have used all the stock in just over a year. It would be awful if you didn't have sufficient to restore your strength the next time you need more of the brew."

"The problem with your suggestion, Jimmy, is that the brew has a limited shelf-life. From the day the mushrooms are first picked, they start to decay. By the time I transfer the brew to bottles, it will only be active for twelve, thirteen or fourteen months, at most."

"But what if no mushrooms are growing at the very time you need to pick some more?" Jade asked.

"In over one hundred years, in fact in almost two hundred years, there has always been a supply of these mushrooms, Jade. Of course, they are extraordinary, mushroom and they only grow in that one place. But they are always a few to be found in the middle of the circle of crooked oak trees."

Jimmy was amazed by what he was hearing. He knew Matilda was old but two hundred years. She looked only the

same age as Amanda, although not as beautiful. Her green skin and large hooked nose were evidence that she was different from other Roombelow residents, even without her pointed hat.

Despite her appearance, Matilda was a much-loved witch in the town of Roombelow. The town's folk even forgave her when she cast a sleeping spell over the whole region because she forgot how to laugh. It was Jimmy who had made her laugh again. But she was also the leader of the coven of Earth's guardians, which included Lord Oron, the Weatherman.

Lord Oron floated over Roombelow, and many other regions of the world, in his cloud controlling the weather. That is, he usually managed the weather. There was the odd instance where he had fallen asleep at the controls until Jimmy persuaded him to train an elf apprentice.

Lord Oron was once a great warrior, but the centuries of travelling the world's skies had taken their toll, and he was no longer the fighter he had once been. That did not prevent him from adding his considerable skills to support Matilda. He

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had a secret love in the Sky Islands. At least, he thought it was a secret. Anyone who had ever seen Lord Oron talking to Lady Cleoptra could not mistake the adoration in his eyes. He visited the Sky Islands at any and every opportunity.

“You seem to be in a bit of a daydream, Jimmy,” Jade observed. “Oh!” Jimmy exclaimed. “Yeah, Jade. My mind was wandering a bit. It was all over the place. I suppose that seeing Matilda so exhausted by the effort of saving you reminded me of how much we need each other. But this time, I couldn’t help. I just had to sit back and marvel at the power the guardians have. You all come together and share your powers. But I can’t help when that happens.”

“Jimmy,” Matilda admonished his idea that he was a minor contributor with a shake of her head. “You have used your considerable powers to save Roombelow and the upper world several times. As powerful as we witches are, we cannot travel among the stars, as you do.”

Jade took Jimmy’s hand in hers and squeezed it. “There is no one else on Earth like you, Jimmy. Your people live on Attalia. You are unique.”

“Yeah, Jade. On Earth, I am unique, but on Attalia, I am one among millions.”

Matilda rose and took Jimmy's other hand in hers. “There is only one Jimmy McGellan,” she said, using his proper birth name, “and your parents would be very proud of the young man you have grown up to be. All the witches in this coven regard you as the son they could never have.”

Jimmy wrapped his arm around Matilda's shoulders. He hid his surprise that he could feel her bones through her shawl. He squeezed gently and confessed, “I have all the friends I need here in Roombelow and in Lithnia. I couldn't be happier that Gemma has found her true family and now lives with them in the cave world of Lithnia. Of course, I miss her. I haven't found another friend quite like her.

“Not even me?” Jade pouted.

“There is only one Jade, and I am pleased to be one of your friends,” Jimmy said with a big smile across his face, while, in his head, he was thinking, thank goodness there's only one – this world would not survive two. At the same time, he gave her tiny hand a reassuring squeeze.

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“I’ll have to get going,” Jimmy said. “I’m expected back for dinner, and I don’t want to be late. Amanda is happiest when we all sit down together for a meal.”

“Everything’s fine here,” Matilda confirmed that she had recovered. “And I have Jade to take care of any emergencies. So, I look forward to seeing you tomorrow after you’ve collected the mushrooms.”

“Probably be back by early afternoon, Matilda. I want to check in with Aunt Ethel while I am in the upper world.”

“Give her our love and see you tomorrow.”

Their byes echoed around Jimmy’s head when he closed the door and set off down the hill.

“I’m home, Amanda,” he announced as he entered the Mayor’s house. Mr McDonald had been the major of Roombelow for so many years, but he still insisted that there should be elections every two years. Not that anyone in Roommbelow would dream of standing for Mayor as long as Mr McDonald looked after them the way he did. No one in Roombelow ever went hungry. Mr McDonald made sure of that. He was the master butcher, and there was always a cut

of some joint of meat or a slice of a juicy roast for anyone whose plate would be empty at dinner time. And Mr McDonald always knew if one of the townsfolk needed a helping hand.

“Dinner is still half an hour away, Jimmy,” Amanda advised. “Mr McDonald is finishing off in the shop, but he won’t be very long. She looked up from the stew she had been stirring in a shiny copper pan on the hotplate. “Did Matilda manage to sort out the phantom door knocker?” Amanda asked.

“Yeah. You were right all along. It was a witch trying to attract my attention.”

“I’ll make one guess that it was Jade who was responsible.

“Got it in one, Amanda”.

“Another spell gone wrong?”

“It went so wrong that it needed all four witches to rescue her.”

“Thank goodness for that. It’s lovely to have a little girl to chat to occasionally. I would miss her if she were gone.”



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“You won’t believe how close she came to being gone, for good. It needed all the power of all four witches to rescue her, and the effort took a heavy toll on Matilda. She came close to total collapse, but enough of the black mushroom brew left to revive her. The problem is she has used up all of that brew, so I promised to collect a fresh supply of mushrooms tomorrow morning.”

“That’s good. You’ll be able to check in on Aunt Ethel while you’re in the upper world.”

“What’s that?” Boomed Mr McDonald’s voice as he closed the door behind himself. “Work over for the day Mr McDonald?” Amanda asked.

“I know it’s been a short working day, Amanda. The morning was almost over by the time I roused myself. And there’s been no Council business today. I’ve only been in the shop for a few hours, but I am exhausted.”

“It sounds like you could use some of Matilda’s mushroom brew,” Jimmy suggested.

“I’ll not be tasting anything that comes out of one of Matilda’s bottles.”

"Mr McDonald!" Amanda looked up, so surprised. "If you were on your last legs, you would take anything we thought would save you."

"There'll be no need for that. I'm just catching up on yesterday's long Council meeting. I'll be fine by tomorrow."

"That's good to hear, Mr McDonald," Jimmy said. "So many people rely on you."

"Another good night's sleep, and I will be over this. And anyway, what's for dinner tonight?"

Amanda burst out laughing. "It sounds like you're already in recovery," she said. "By the time you and Jimmy have washed your hands, I'll be ready to serve up the stew with a thick slice of freshly baked bread to mop up the gravy."

"My mouth is already watering, and that's just from the smell." Jimmy, too was ready to sample Amanda's stew.

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## Chapter 4

**T**he morning light gradually brightened as Jimmy emerged from the hole that joined the upper world to Roombelow. The morning mist still hung low among the trees in the forest on the edge of Esh village. A right turn would carry Jimmy further into the woods, but first, he wanted to say hello to his surrogate mother, Aunt Ethel, who had brought up the orphaned alien child as if he was her own.

Needless to say, whenever Jimmy returned to his first home in Aunt Ethel's cottage, there was a drink and a biscuit laid on the table to welcome him home. Aunt Ethel always knew when Jimmy was coming to visit. She had some sort of a sixth sense regarding visitors. "Always nice to see you, Jimmy, but what brings you to Esh today."

"I'm on an errand to collect some mushrooms for Matilda, Aunt Ethel."

“That’ll be those magic mushrooms that keep Matilda so young and spry, despite her great age.”

“I didn’t know that you knew about Matilda’s mushroom brew.!

Oh, I’ve known about it for years, but I’ve never managed to make a brew like Matilda’s. She must add a special ingredient that gives it those magical powers.”

“I’ve never tasted it, Aunt Ethel, but I do know it smells foul. I certainly wouldn’t want to drink any.”

“A fine-looking boy like you doesn’t need a special brew to look well. You always look good.”

Jimmy took a sip of Ethel’s homemade lemonade and then confessed. “I may look fine, Aunt Ethel, but I don’t feel fine inside.”

“Whatever is wrong, Jimmy? I have never seen you down in the mouth before.”

“Oh! Aunt Ethel. If only I knew,” Jimmy responded.

“Just at the moment, life does not seem like much fun.”

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“But you have so many wonderful friends in Roombelow and even beyond the stars. There aren’t many young men who can claim to have friends at both ends of the universe. I don’t know anyone who calls four witches and the young apprentice Jade their friends. And who could forget the mighty Lord Oron and his Weathercloud? Or even the lovely Gemma who you rescued from the bottom of the well.”

“And they’re all very dear to me, Aunt Ethel and Mr McDonald and Amanda care for me just as you do. But something is missing. I love all my friends. I know I am privileged to have homes on Earth, under Earth, and beyond Earth on my home planet of Attalia. I have some special powers and a friendly talking computer. XRU.

”But something is missing, Aunt Ethel. It’s like there is a hole in the pit of my stomach and nothing tastes as good as it used to. It’s like someone has taken my happiness away. Of course, no one has. What is wrong with me? ”

Aunt Ethel continued her crocheting for a little while. Then she laid down her hooked needles and took Jimmy’s

hands in hers. "There's nothing wrong with you, Jimmy. There's nothing to worry about, even if, at the moment, the world seems to be pressing you down into the very earth you walk on. All that's wrong is that you are no longer a boy. You are growing up into a fine young man. And a fine young man needs a fine young lady to share his feelings with."

"I talk and share all my adventures with Gemma. Although she now lives with her own family in Lithuania, it only takes me a few hours to get there. We are still the best and dearest of friends."

"And when you talk to her, do you put your arms around her and hold her close to you?"

"No. We just sit and talk and laugh and make plans about what we might do next."

"And have you ever kissed your best friend?"

"No!" Jimmy objected forcefully. "We're just friends. Not sweethearts."

"And therein might lie your problem, Jimmy. Perhaps you are old enough to need a sweetheart. Someone with

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whom you can share life and kiss and cuddle, every once in a while, and plan for a future growing closer together. Perhaps even bringing up your own family into this wonderful world you live in on both sides of the skies.”

Jimmy did not reply. His head was heavy in his hands, elbows resting on the kitchen table, and Aunt Ethel returned to her needlework.

After a few minutes of silence, Jimmy lifted his head and asked, “How do I find that special someone to share everything with, Aunt Ethel?”

“I don’t have the answers you seek, Jimmy. It’s just something that happens when you meet the right soul mate. No one knows when it will happen. All I can say is that you will know it’s the right person when you meet her. All I can say is when the magic happens, your whole world will change in the blink of an eye. You could search a lifetime and not find that person, or you could turn around and find she’s been standing behind you for some while.

“One word of warning, Jimmy. Yes, it is magical but don’t try to make it happen by using Matilda’s magic. She will want to help you but not allow her to enter you or another into a false partnership. Love must come from the hear, not from a witches wand.”

“Thank you, Aunt Ethel. I think I understand. At the very least, you have explained why I feel such strange moods.”

“The moods will come and go, Jimmy. The important thing is to know why you feel the way you do. You are not going mad. Almost every man alive has passed through this gateway. Not even my powers can predict where or when, or even if. The best advice I can offer is don’t allow the moods to destroy you, and don’t waste your life away searching for something that might never happen. Continue living your life as you are doing: to the best of your ability. Aim to hurt none and just perhaps, fate will bring you the one you deserve.”



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“Thanks, Aunt Ethel. I sort of understand. But I think I’d better get those mushrooms picked and get them back to Matilda as soon as I can.”

“That’s fine, Jimmy. Take care and don’t worry too much. Your whole life lies ahead, but whatever happens, do keep coming back to let me know how your world is turning.”

Jimmy kissed Aunt Ethel on the cheek and began his trek into the forest, past the hidden hole that led to Roombelow and even deeper into the forest. He hardly glanced at SR3, his hidden starship, screened from view under a covering of branches. A little further on, Jimmy walked to the centre of the circle of crooked oak trees.

He had never doubted that there would be a crop of black mushroom ready to harvest, just as Matilda had said there would be. He gathered a sackful of precious mushrooms in the next to no time and began his homeward journey. The hole that led down to Roombelow was well hidden, but Jimmy knew his way almost blindfolded.

Jimmy followed a well-worn path through the fields and entered his Roombelow home. The Mayor's house was the largest in the square. "Hi," he announced as he entered, "I'm back, Amanda. Is Mr McDonald home from his council business yet?"

"He'll be back a little later, Jimmy. The Council have an extra session that may run into the evening. They're discussing building more homes on the southern edge of the village. The population of Roombelow seems to grow every year. We'll soon be needing a bigger school when all the new babies grow up a bit more."

"Do you mind if I trot up the hill to see Matilda?"

"Not a problem, Jimmy. I think you can have a good afternoon's visit before dinner is ready. See you later then."

Jimmy made his way to the chief witch's house on the hill. Matilda and Jade looked up from their studies around the kitchen table; Matilda put her finger to her lips and tipped her head towards the fireside armchair. Jade was engrossed in the exercise that Matilda had set, and total concentration held

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her attention to the extent that she did not even know that Jimmy had arrived.

Jimmy was familiar with the strangeness of a young witch learning witchcraft ways, so he stayed silent and just sank into the comfortable upholstery in front of the ever-burning fire. He helped himself by reaching up into the smog that always hung from the wooden rafters. Within the smog lay everything necessary to prepare a meal, but whatever the reacher was thinking of at the time was the item that materialised into his outstretched hand. And Matilda's concoctions of juices were the sweetest to be found on Earth.

Beatrix sprang into Jimmy's lap and rubbed her head against Jimmy's chest by way of a welcome she reserved for Jimmy alone. No one else, not even Matilda, was greeted in the same way. Jimmy scratched behind her ears, and Beatrix mewled her appreciation.

Matilda was dotting about in the kitchen preparing the mushroom broth, which formed the base of magic brew.

The combination of the heat from the fire and the musical purring tones of cat satisfaction lulled Jimmy into an almost trance like state of relaxation.

“A penny for them,” Matilda brought Jimmy back to reality. “Oh! Matilda. My mind is all over the place at the moment.”

“there’s usually a good reason for that sickness, Jimmy. What is worrying you at the moment?”

Jimmy looked over the headrest of his chair, checking on Jade. “Don’t worry about Jade. She’s off in the underworld trying to recapture the python she allowed to escape a little while ago.”

“A snake python?” Jimmy asked, incredulously.

“I don’t believe there is any other kind,” Matilda smiled at Jimmy’s discomfort. He nervously queried, “She’s not bringing it back here, is she?”

“Why, Jimmy. I do believe I detect a little concern in your query. No need to be concerned. As soon as Jade finds the python, she will send it back to the Congo, where it lives.”

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“So you say, Matilda. But Jade is still an apprentice, and I’ve been around when she makes mistakes.”

“She’s getting better all the time, Jimmy. She makes far fewer mistakes these days. Why it has only taken a couple more practice sessions this morning, and she has the invisibility spell off to a T.”

“I’ve got it, Matilda. I’ve got it,” shrieked Jade.

“Well, send it home,” pleaded Jimmy. “There’s no room in Matilda’s house for a giant python.”

“No worry, Jimmy. I’m sending it back now.”

“Well. Do it!” Jimmy begged. And before anyone could move, Jimmy was transported deep into the jungle close to the Congo River. The python was now free and hungrily turned its attention to Jimmy. In a moment, Jimmy was caught up in the coils of the enormous reptile. He didn’t have a chance to run. His chest was being squeezed tight by the giant wrapped around him. It felt that his chest would collapse under the pressure, but Jade appeared with her wand in hand just before he lost consciousness. Jade’s wand sent out a beam of

green light that encircled Jimmy and the python. The light beam rose, taking the python with it, and Jade directed the shaft of light towards the tallest nearby tree. The python escaped into the surrounding jungle, and Jimmy sank to the ground on all fours gasping for breath.

“See,” Jade perkily said. “You were never in any danger. It’s gone, now.”

“Oh! Jade,” Jimmy gasped in between great gulps of air. “Whatever will become of you. Or, more importantly, what will become of the people around you? You’re a walking disaster of a witch.”

“No, I’m not, Uncle Jimmy! I saved you from the python, didn’t I?”

“And look at where we are, Jade. In the middle of the jungle in the centre of Africa. I enjoyed a drink in Matilda’s kitchen not two minutes ago. Can you get us back there? Please.”

“Not a problem, Uncle Jimmy. In just a shake of my wand, I can now take us anywhere we want to go.”

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“Well! How come we are in the Congo. Jade?”

“That’s just because you were so close to the python when I cast the spell.”

“The point is that there should never have been a python in Matilda’s kitchen.”

“There isn’t one now,” Jade smiled triumphantly.

“I give up. Please, please take us back, both of us together. Do not leave me stranded in this jungle.”

“As if I would do that,” Jade laughed and waved her wand again.

Jimmy wondered if Jade’s wand gave off green coloured light was because she was still a bit green as a witch. The green haze enveloped them both. The jungle disappeared, and they were back in Matilda’s house on the hill instantly.

“Well done, Jade.” Matilda praised her young student.  
“You almost got it right.”

“And I almost met my end,” Jimmy complained.

“You were never in any danger, Jimmy. Don’t exaggerate,”

“You weren’t the one having your life’s breath squeezed out of you,” Jimmy retorted.

“OK,” Matilda said. “All’s well that ends well.”

“You would see it from a different point of view if it was your end that a python was strangling. But I only popped in to give you the mushrooms, Matilda, and to say a brief hello to you, Jade. Time has flown by, and now I’ve got to get back. Amanda’s cooking dinner, and I don’t want to be late.”

“See you tomorrow, Uncle Jimmy,” shouted Jade as she waved Jimmy off. And Matilda shouted, “Bye,” as the door swung closed.



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## Chapter 5

**J**immy was hardly listening as Mr McDonald relayed what had happened at the Council meeting. Amanda did not show that she had noticed his lack of attention and appeared, as ever, keenly interested in whatever her husband had to say.

When Mr McDonald had finished his discourse, he turned to Jimmy, who had left half of his dinner untouched. “That’s not like you, Jimmy,” he said. “You’ve hardly said a word since we started dinner.”

“I do apologise, Mr McDonald. I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“It’s not that I’m miffed, Jimmy. It’s more that I am concerned that there may be something wrong with you, that you feel you can’t tell us about.”

"It's nothing like that, Mr McDonald. You and Amanda are like the closest family I have on Earth, after Aunt Ethel."

"Of course," Amanda added.

"When you are in pain, we feel your pain as if it was our own, Jimmy."

"I promise you I would tell you if I was unwell or in pain. But let me assure you I am not ill or injured in any way. Just like Aunt Ethel said, I have growing pains, and everyone goes through them. Don't they?"

"Your Aunt Ethel is a very wise lady, Jimmy. If that is what she says, then I for one believe her," Amanda said

"Yes," agreed Mr McDonald. "I can remember the pain in my arms and legs as they grew longer. Sometimes my legs would ache even when lying still in bed. So, I still remember a little about the discomfort of growing up.

"If Amanda would make me a cup of milky cocoa, I think I'll take it to bed a little earlier than usual."

"Of course, no one minds, Mr McDonald," Amanda assured him. "You've had a long day of meetings at the

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Council. You can go up to bed now, and I'll bring the cocoa up to you as soon as the milk boils."

"Thanks, Amanda. I'll be off then. And don't you worry, Jimmy. Growing pains usually only last a week or two at a time. I'm sure you'll be fine in a day or two. Goodnight."

Mr McDonald's heavy footfall creaked the old wooden stairs as he wearily climbed towards his bed. The milk in the pan almost boiled over, but Amanda scooped it off the fire grate just in time and got up to make a cup of cocoa. Jimmy started to rise, ready to clear and wash the dinner dishes before he too took an early night. Amanda looked Jimmy in the eye and commanded, "And you just stay there until I get back, young man. Growing pains, indeed." She had no doubts that Jimmy's 'problems' lay elsewhere,

Jimmy sank back into the fireside chair and waited for Amanda to return. When she did, she poured two more cups and cocoa and sat by Jimmy, staring into the flickering flames of the log fire, each sipping their milky drinks.

"I know that all young people have growing pains, Jimmy. But your pain isn't in your legs. Is it?"

"Your pain is in your heart, young man."

Jimmy's nod was almost imperceptible.

"Mr McDonald and I have no children of our own, but that does not mean we don't know how painful it is to have a wish for a friend with who we can share our every secret. We were fortunate to find each other a bit later in life than most.

"How did you meet?"

"It was just outside this very house. I had come to draw water from the well, but the bucket got stuck. It snagged on a loose, broken brick. Mr McDonald saw me struggling to joggle the bucket free, and like a knight in shining armour, he came to my rescue. And he has been my champion ever since."

"That's lovely, Amanda."

"And the love of your life may come in a similar moment when you least expect it. So, my best advice is not to waste your time on wishful thinking. Just open your heart and mind. Let that moment come to you, as it surely will, Jimmy."

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“If you have to wait as long as Mr McDonald did, don’t be sad. Think how much more pleasurable the experience will be when it happens.

“However, let me give you a warning. You already have a very close lady friend who thinks the world of you, Jimmy. When you find that special person, give a thought to what it will do to her.”

“But Gemma will always be my very best friend,” Amanda”.

“You and I both know that, but Gemma will be hurt if you cast her aside like an old blanket.”

“I wouldn’t do that. Ever” Jimmy responded

“And I don’t think you ever would, on purpose, that is. I’m just pointing out, Jimmy, that Gemma’s feelings are deeper than you think.”

“Oh. Amanda, I would never have guessed. She’s a very dear friend. There’s no way I would want to hurt her.”

“That’s what I am trying to tell you, Jimmy. Gemma knows she’ll never be your one and only. She’s from a

different kind of people. But that doesn't mean she doesn't love you dearly."

"I never knew she thought like that. What can I do, Amanda?"

"There's not a lot you can do, Jimmy. Except to remember to keep her in your heart as the dear friend that she is. When you find the love of your life, keep that little corner in your heart free for Gemma."

"Always "

"I've never known you hurt anyone on purpose. All I ask is that you keep in mind that Gemma feels she will always be in your debt because you rescued her from the well and then proceeded to reunite her with her true family in Lithnia."

"I'll do my very best never to hurt her, Amanda. I treasure our friendship."

"I don't suppose anyone can ask for more, Jimmy. But that's enough of that. Let's finish off cleaning the dishes, and we'll both be off to bed."

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## Chapter 6

Jade continued her training under the tutelage of Matilda. The minor hiccoughs were forgiven and forgotten and each day brought fresh challenges on the path to securing a place among the witch sisters. Matilda continued to place more and more expectations on her young shoulders. She never moved Jade to a higher grade until she perfected the previous level. Jade never made the same mistake twice. She learned from her mistakes, increasing her stature among the sisterhood day by day.

So, it was not surprising that when Matilda received a call for help from the Aquamites beneath Roombelow, she sent Jade to investigate first. The map to the green lake where the Aquamites lived in a green cavern fed by the blue waterfall was well known. What was not known was that when the giant

eel returned to the sea, the spring that fed the stream that fell one hundred feet over a wide shelf into the green lake had changed access to the Aquamites. The lake's level rose until it reached the roof of the tunnel through which the green lake's water flowed out into the myriad of rivers and streams, some of which flowed through Lithnia and others that travelled to the well in the centre Roombelow. When Gemma and Jimmy visited the Emerald lake, they used Mr McDonald's rowing boat. There was now no access to the green lake unless you were a fish.

Matilda explained to Jade that the chief of the Aquamites was a merman named Milton. Being a witch meant that she had no trouble negotiating the passages where the water flowed up to ceiling height. She was able to call upon Elwinn's skills to negotiate her way safely through waters.

When Jade emerged from the underground waterway that carried the river away from the Emerald lake, she rose to the lake's surface inside the Emerald cavern. The beauty of the scene took her breath away for a moment. The curtain of



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water falling into the lake created contrasting blue splashes as it hit the surface of the emerald lake. Light reflected and lit up the whole cavern. The very walls of the cavern emitted the light in a continuous stream of visible energy.

As Milton's head broke through the surface, Jade's eyes snapped back to the lake. She hid her surprise as best she could and asked, "Are you Milton, head of the Aquamites?"

"Indeed, I am, young lady. But who do I have the pleasure of addressing?"

"I am Jade, chief assistant to the leader of the sisters of witchcraft."

"I am surprised one so young holds such an important position. But you are very welcome to our world of water. I sent Matilda a message requesting assistance in our current plight."

"And Matilda has sent me to determine what you require, Lord Milton."

“Please,” Milton said. “I am not a lord in any sense of the word.

“It just happens that I am the most senior Aquamite because of my age. And it falls to me to ask the sisterhood for help.”

“Whatever is the nature of your problem, Milton? Everything looks so peaceful.”

One by one, more and more heads began bobbing up and down in the lake around Milton. They all appeared to have blond, grey or white hair. The feminine members of the clan sported long flowing locks which afforded their visible bodies with a degree of modesty.

“Everything might appear at peace,” Milton explained, “But beneath the calm surface, we are being attacked by strange creatures. They are like water serpents who come out of the cracks that appear on the lake's floor. First, a stream of bubbles comes from where the cracks first appear. At the same time, there is hot water coming from the cracks. You can

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see the heat coils rising, and if you get too close, you can get scalded by the hot water.”

“The temperature must drop very quickly after it exits the cracks,” Jade suggested.

“True, Jade. It does. You only get scalded if you move quite close to the vents on the floor. The biggest danger comes from the serpents that lurk inside the vents. They shoot out like bolts from the blue, take one bite of flesh and then disappear back into the vents. We’ve tried using harpoons to catch them, but they move so quickly in open water, and they shoot out flames that survive in water. We can’t catch them. And once they’re back in their vents, it’s so hot, and we can’t reach them.”

“How many Aquamites have been taken?” Jade asked.

“No more than five, so far,” Milton’s companion interjected.

“I thought it was only four, Vanata,” Milton looked surprised by the revelation. “There has been another victim in the last hour. Milton, it was your brother, Arnon.”

He shook his head in disbelief. "What more can we do to protect ourselves. We are few enough left to continue our existence without the necessity of having to fight off attacks from these invaders."

The remaining Aquamites gathered around their leader to support the loss of Arnon, Milton's youngest brother. His head hung low, but only for a moment. Vanata squeezed his hand and gave a sad smile. "We must keep our energy to fight the enemy. Now is not the time to grieve."

Milton put his arm around Vanata's shoulders and hugged her close briefly. "That, Jade, is why I put out a cry for help to the sisterhood. We need a champion with greater powers than we can muster."

"And we need more magic than I have in my wand," Jade apologised. "I am just an apprentice, Milton."

"I'll have to report back to Matilda to seek a solution to this threat. And the quicker I get back, the better for all. Please stay strong until I return."

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Jade metamorphosed into a coil of bright green smoke with tears in her eyes and those of the Aquamites. They believed that their only hope was not able to help them.

Jade's puff of smoke was back at the bottom of the well in Roombelow in two shakes of a mermaid's tail. A moment or two later, she was debriefing to Matilda. "They are under attack from some kind of dragonfish that lives in volcanic fissures at the bottom of their lake."

"How big are these dragons?" Jimmy asked. Matilda had invited him to attend Jade's debriefing.

"I have not seen one in the flesh," Jade admitted, "and the reports from the Aquamites who have witnessed the beasts are very different. Some say they are as fat as a grown merman but twice as long. Others report long, thin creatures, half the size of a Merman. But all their reports mention the fact that they breathe out fire, like dragons. But, the fire is not extinguished by water."

"There are no such creatures on Earth," Matilda pointed out. "Have you come across anything like them, Jimmy?"

“Never,” Jimmy replied. “The Wormz we met last year are different, galactic creatures. And they certainly did not spew out fire. And I have never heard of a fire that continues to burn in water.”

Jade was horrified. “We can’t just abandon the Aquamites. We need a new spell to defend them against their new predator.”

“Easier said than done, Jade,” Matilda frowned as she wandered back and forth in front of her fireplace. Her brow scrunched over her eyes, searching her memories for an answer. “I’ll have to call the coven together. This problem needs many minds to resolve the difficulties the Aquamites face.”

Jimmy chose an armchair by the fire, and Matilda’s jet black cat, Beatrix, immediately joined him. Matilda and Jade sat side by side at the velvet-covered table on which stood the crystal ball. The crystal conveyed Matilda’s call to call her acolytes to a meeting. Even Lord Oron the Weatherman was included in the call to arms.

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“This is an emergency,” Matilda announced to the gathered. “Fire breathing serpents are consuming our friends, the Aquamites.”

“Surely not the resurrection of the Wormz?” Ira asked incredulously.

“We are not sure. But Jade, who has come closest to the Wormz, tells me that the creatures are different from the Wormz. The Worms did not breathe out fire, nor did they live in water. These creatures appear to reside in deep fissures that reach into the very centre of the earth.

“The problem is that these serpents are also killers. They consume their prey and leave not even a bone if they have the opportunity. At other times they take a bite of flesh and then beat a retreat to their homes deep in the Earth’s interior.”

The Weatherman continued the description. “And the closer they get to the centre of the Earth, the hotter the rocks become until they melt into a red hot liquid known as magma.”

“Like volcanic lava?” Jade queried.

“The very same,” Matilda agreed. “I cannot begin to understand how any creature could survive such intense heat.”

Jimmy piped up. “I have read about marine worms that safely live out their lives inside volcanic vents. The only part ever seen is the head which comes out to feed on passing krill which feed on the plankton.”

“What’s plankton,” asked a puzzled Jade.

“Plankton is, or precisely, are, microscopic creatures that inhabit almost everywhere in the sea. They may be tiny, but they are at the bottom of the food chain for much of the ocean’s creatures. Krill feed on plankton and grow to be more than one or two millimetres long. They look a little like miniature shrimp, and they are the basic diet of many of the ocean’s giants, like Manta rays and even the largest of whales,” explained Jimmy.

“Thank you, Jimmy,” Matilda said, a little exasperated. “But that doesn’t help us at all to understand these fire



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breathing serpents. If they lived on land, they would be called dragons.”

“In years gone by,” Lord Oron offered, “we fought many a battle against dragons. But these serpents are a new enemy, and I don’t know how to combat them.”

“That is why we are all gathered, Lord Oron,” Matilda reminded the coven. “It is up to us to formulate a plan to save the Aquamites from these demons. Milton needs our help. He has never had to face such an enemy ever before.”

“The world of water is my domain to care for, Matilda, but I have not an inkling of an idea how to tackle the serpents.” Elwinn hung her head.

Just at that moment, they were all devoid of ideas.

## Chapter 7

**H**ow long they sat huddled together without a sound surprised even Jimmy. He appeared to be just an observer. Jimmy was not a member of Earth's guardians, but they had called upon him several times to use his unique talents to save the day.

The witches and Jade formed a circle around the crystal. Matilda dressed all in black with ever-moving emblems on her robe, sat at the head of the table with Elwinn, sprite of all Earth's waters, on her right-hand side. On her left, the figure of Lord Oron, the Weatherman, occupied a position that reflected his many years of service. Next to him sat Floella in flowing green and brown robes was the witch whose brief was to watch over the land. Opposite him, the insubstantial figure of Ira, who roamed the skies, delved into her memories,

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seeking a solution to the problem facing the Aquamites. Jade, as yet unassigned, completed their powerful circle. She was still in training, but the gathered coven still considered her opinions.

Their ruminations bounced off the crystal globe and cast a rainbow of beauty in the witch's house on the hill. Jimmy was mesmerised by the sight of the witches at work. And the townsfolk of Roombelow were left in no doubt that magic was at work as beams of multicoloured light streamed from every window of the house on the hill.

Matilda called the meeting to order, and slowly the colours subsided. When everyone was present in mind and body, she reached up into the fog and brought four glasses of her amber nectar to the table. She explained to Jade and Jimmy, "Jade, you don't need this brew to help you to recover. Your youth works in your favour, and you'll recover before anyone else does. And Jimmy. Well, you have stayed in this world, and your youth will protect you. We have no idea what effect our brew would have on you. Our spirits have been

roaming backwards and forwards, searching for an answer. That has sapped our energy considerably. It needs replenishing.”

“Don’t worry about me, Matilda. I’m fine. I would let you know if there was a problem, but so far, the only problem I have is the same as every one of us:: how do we protect the Aquamites from the fiery serpents?”

Jade asked the question uppermost in her mind. “How do the serpents manage to exhale fire in their breath while they are underwater. Surely water puts out the fire?”

Elwin offered an answer. “I have seen fire enter the water at the bottom of the sea inside bubbles. The bubbles rise to the surface burning all the time until they reach the surface. Once there, the bubble bursts and the fire inside flares into the air and then disappears. Sometimes there is a continuous flow of bubbles from deep in the oceans’ floor, and when they reach the surface, they create a continuous burning flame.”

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“I also have seen such flames, Elwin,” said Floella. “They come for the centre of the earth where there are enormous pockets of methane gas trapped in the rocks. The high temperatures of the magma, many miles below the surface, ignite the gas. The sailors who have viewed the miracle of what seems to be burning water named it St Elmer’s fire. They were wrong, of course. Because St Elmo’s fire has no fire in it: it is an electrical discharge between oxygen and nitrogen that makes the air glow blue, similar to the light you see around the flames when methane gas burns.”

Elwin added, “The only two places in the world where I have not seen such fire is in the Arctic sea and the sea around the North pole.”

“Why should that be?” Jimmy asked.

“I don’t have the answer to that, Jimmy. Perhaps the gas cannot pass through the ice,” Elwin offered her guess.

“I don’t think that is the reason,” Floella added. “The bubbles would still come to the surface somewhere where the ice ended.”

Jimmy offered his opinion. " We are all missing the point. Elwin may have provided us with a solution."

Those gathered around Matilda's table looked at each, puzzled. Jimmy continued to outline his thoughts. "We have heard what Floella and Elwin think. Both of them mentioned ice as a barrier to gas. But the gas can bubble around an ice barrier.

"I'm thinking of something a bit different. A way of restricting the serpents."

"What use is ice when facing fire breathing serpents?" Lord Oron asked, a little sceptical. "They would melt the ice with their fiery breath. I think it's a case of 'back to the drawing board, Jimmy. We don't just want to restrict the serpents; we want to remove them." Jimmy admired Lord Oron and went silent rather than respond unkindly to the 'old man of the skies', but in his mind, he was sure that ice held the answer to their problems.

He tried to work it out in his mind. Could an ice cover over the lake help the Aquamites? They did not need to

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breathe the air because they had gills in their necks like fish. And they could also survive breathing air for hours at a time, as long as their gills did not dry out.

If the Weatherman could create ice on the lake's surface, it would continue to float because ice is less dense than water. They needed ice at the bottom of the lake, but there was no way of keeping any ice on the lake's floor for any length of time. As soon as ice formed, it would rise to the surface. Could the creatures be entombed in ice if they could be attracted to the surface of the lake? Then, if the serpents are trapped in ice, how can they be removed from the Emerald Lake, and where could they be taken that would keep us safe.?

Jimmy's mind was in overdrive, but all he was doing was going round in circles. His cogitations were interrupted by a tap on the shoulder, and Jade asked, "Are you still with us, Jimmy?"

"Yes, Jade. I'm trying to work out if it would be possible to trap the serpents in blocks of ice."

That drew Lord Oron's attention. "Now, there's an idea worth thinking about."

"That is what I have been doing for the last few minutes, Lord Oron."

The four witches were listening to the exchange.

Jimmy continued. "The serpents are not used to cold. They live next to the centre of the earth's molten core. They can withstand high temperatures, but what about low temperatures?"

The witches gathered around the table shrugged their shoulders. No one had any idea how a serpent might be affected by the cold. Jade offered her opinion. "I know that many warm-blooded mammals slow down their metabolism when their environment gets cold, and some even go into hibernation; almost every organ slows down to the point where they go to sleep to conserve energy."

"Good thinking, Jade," Jimmy agreed. "Now we just have to come up with a way of keeping serpents cool enough for long enough that they hibernate. Then we can get use SR3



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to dump them in an ultracold world somewhere out there in space.”

“Lord Oron, can you use your weather cloud to lower the temperature of the lake to form ice?” Elwin asked.

“The cloud could do that, Elwin, but I don’t know how to get the cloud to the Emerald Lake. Jimmy has told us how got the giant eel to leave the area above the lake by taking it through the tunnels to get it to the bottom of the sea, but my Cloud cannot travel in water. It can only move through the air.”

Matilda spoke up. “Elwin as guardian of the watery realms, could you bring the magic of Lord Oron’s cloud down to the Emerald lake?”

“I would have no trouble negotiating my way into the lake, and I suppose if the serpents were in hibernation, I might be able to get them into the sea, in theory. I am not sure that I have enough power to replicate the freezing that Lord Oron’s cloud can bring.

Jimmy added his thoughts. “Once they are at the surface of the sea, I think I could gather them all in a net and

pull them behind starship SR3 into deep space. There isn't enough room to carry them inside SR3, and anyway, we'll need to keep them trapped in the ice so that they don't wake up. Can Elwin or Lord Oron do that?"

"It's a definite possibility, Jimmy." Lord Oron said. "But we have not yet established that we have the means to keep the serpents trapped inside blocks of ice nor how we attract them to rise to the surface of the lake so that we can freeze the water around them."

"It sounds like we almost have a plan," Matilda said. "But there are still holes to fill and a major link to find. Our plan falls apart if we cannot entice the serpents to rise to the surface. Any ideas?"

The gathering went silent and stayed silent for a good few minutes. The fire crackling in the grate was the only sound to be heard.

"Surely," Jimmy queried, "The Aquamites know what attracts the serpents?"

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“As far as I can tell,” offered Jade, “it’s the very presence of Aquamites that attracts the serpents. There are so many Aquamites with bites taken out of their tails.”

“Well, we can’t use Aquamites as bait,” Matilda pronounced.

Lord Oron offered his opinion. “I don’t think we should discount that plan until we have talked to Milton. He is their leader, and he is concerned that the serpents are taking more and more Aquamites. We should at least ask him if he has any ideas.”

Elwin stepped forward. “I have met Milton before, and I’ll be able to travel there and back in seconds because every part of the journey is connected to water, be it rivers, streams, lakes or even waterfalls. I can pass through them all in an instant.”

“Let’s not waste any further time,” Matilda suggested. Elwin, will you take Jimmy? He seems to know quite a lot about the Aquamites.”

“Of course, Matilda. Jimmy has my blue sapphire belt so he can safely travel through water, and if he keeps hold of my hand, I can dematerialise both of us, and we will pass through the water together.”

There was no further discussion. The guardians watched as Jimmy rotated the sapphire buckle on the belt he always wore, a present from Elwin, and reached out to hold onto Elwin's hand. In that instant, they disappeared from view and moved like an arrow of mist into the stream behind Matilda's house. They were gone from Roombelow in a flash. Jimmy did not even think about how he and Elwin could breathe beneath the water's surface.

He had never experienced the world while he was in a dematerialised state. He had used the magic of Elwin's belt to help keep him dry as he passed through water in streams, rivers and even seas, but Jimmy had never seen the world pass him by as though he wasn't there. There was no sensation of movement, although he was moving through the water at enormous speed. Effortlessly he was dragged

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alongside Elwin through the rivers and streams, up and down waterfalls. Their journey ended in the surface layers of the Emerald Lake. It seemed to Jimmy that Elwin had created an invisible air bubble around them. He did not even have to hold his breath.

Milton, the chief Aquamite, welcomed Elwin. "And welcome to you, Jimmy.

"It's an age since you rescued us from Olson the giant eel. And here we are again in need of further assistance from you and Elwin. The attacks by the serpents are becoming bolder by the day. It was once the case that we had to pass close to the vents on the lake floor before they would chase after us. But now it seems that whenever they are hungry, they swim through our lake and take victims at their leisure. We have no defence against them."

More Aquamites had gathered, although they were fearful of Elwin. The children hung close to their parents and tried to hide themselves behind the long flowing fins and wispy tails of the Aquamaites.

“Just at the moment, we don’t have an answer as to how we can save you,” Elwin announced. “Our magic doesn’t seem to work on these serpents. We can throw a protective shield around ourselves, but we don’t have the power to protect everyone. Jimmy is here to take a closer look at the serpents because they may be another extraterrestrial visitor..”

The Emerald Lake was the domain of the Aquamites, but they no longer had freedom of movement within its waters. They were wary of where the next serpent attack might come from, but that was the very place that Jimmy needed to visit.

“I don’t think we have any other option but to swim down in the hope that we might see one of these creatures,” Jimmy said. “Will you cast your protection around us, Elwin?”

“Of course, I will, Jimmy. When we need it.”

“Why not now, Elwin?”

“Because I don’t know how long the spell will hold its strength to keep the serpents out.”

“That’s not very reassuring.”

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“What would life be like without a bit of danger, now and +then?

“I am used to danger, Elwin. But usually, I have a plan in mind. This time I have no idea how significant a threat these monsters pose.”

“It seems everyone is relying on you, Jimmy, because our witch’s magic doesn’t seem to influence the serpents. We may be able to protect ourselves in a bubble, but we can’t harm them.”

## Chapter 8

.” **B**efore we go any further, I need to see one of these creatures,” Jimmy said.

“The only way to do that”, Milton said, “is to place yourself in harm’s way.”

“I think not,” Jimmy replied. “Elwin has magic that can protect us from attack.

“Don’t place too much faith in my magic,” Elwin warned. “It is a spell to protect a single witch. I don’t know how much protection it will give to the two of us, Jimmy.”

“I don’t think my speed will help when I’m underwater. My red Attalian boots give me great speed over land, but I have no idea what will happen underwater.”

“Well, Jimmy. Do we try or not?” Elwin asked.



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“We must, Elwin. We cannot stand by and see the Aquamites wiped out by fire breathing serpents.”

Jimmy turned to Milton. “What is the hotspot for attacks? Better that we search places where they are known to attack than do a random search of the lake’s bed.”

“My daughter, Annison, will guide you to a point above the hot vents where the majority of attacks have occurred.”

“Thank you, Milton,” Elwin acknowledged Milton’s offer. “That is a big ask of your daughter. We do not wish to place her in danger.”

“Let her answer for herself,” Milton said, and he issued a whistle with his head under the surface. The singing, whistling sound would travel far and wide in the lake because sound travels much further in water. He raised his head and announced, “Annison will arrive in a short moment or two. “She just finishing off a small task for her mother, Vanata.”.

Milton had hardly finished speaking when a pale blue and gold shadow came streaking through the lake towards them. It stopped with a swirl of back-peddling tail and fins.

Only then could Jimmy make out the form of a young mermaid with long, golden-blond hair that swirled around her to below her waist in the emerald water of the lake. The glistening, green streaks in Annison's hair mirrored the movement of the emerald lake's surface ripples. She seemed to be in constant motion, dancing, although she was stationary, well, more like swaying, in the crystal clear waters of the lake.

"What do need me for, father," she asked in a voice that reminded Jimmy of ringing bells and the melody of a stream of water bubbling over rocks.

It was only at that moment that she noticed the two strangers to the lake. She had heard of Witch Elwin but had never met her. She almost panicked but held herself together, although she splashed her way to her father's side for a bit of protection. "Do forgive my manners," she apologised to Elwin, ignoring the red-headed Jimmy by the side of the witch. Milton introduced her formally to the strangers and explained what the visitors needed. Annison herself was in awe of the red-haired stranger with pointed ears and big blue eyes.

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Elwin discretely nudged Jimmy and whispered, "You can close your mouth now, Jimmy. And stop staring. It's rude."

Jimmy quickly recovered his composure and took his eyes off the vision that had appeared before him just in time to hear Annison confirm that she would guide them to the most dangerous area of the lake where most attacks had taken place.

Elwin said, "We need to do this as quickly as possible, Annison. If these serpents spread beyond the Emerald Lake, they could bring catastrophe to the rest of the world. Can we go there now?"

Annison turned to her father for his approval. "Of course, we must help you, Elwin," he replied. "And Annison is free to help you now if she so wishes. The Aquamites are first in the firing line, and the battle is becoming more intense with every passing day. We are only a few hundred left in our Lake; the serpents will wipe us out in no time if we take no action."

“I will do whatever you ask of me,” Annison confirmed her commitment to helping. She moved toward Elwin. “And I will do so the instant you ask.”

Elwin placed her hands on Annison's shoulders. “You are a brave daughter of the Aquamite's leader. He should be proud of your determination to help. Let us go now while our confidence is high. Jimmy and I will follow in your wake. Don't worry if it looks as if there is only one of us. We will simply be tied together with magic so that Jimmy can breathe underwater.”

“Are you saying that he cannot breathe underwater, Elwin?”

“Not without my help. But don't worry about Jimmy breathing. Worry about those fire-spewing serpents and show us where the best place is to find them.”

“Follow me,” Annison said. “I will stay on the surface until we reach the hot spot. Then it's up to you. I won't risk swimming into their lair.”

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“We can expect no more,” Elwin assured. “Return to your father as soon as we dive. And thank you, Annison.”

“I need to do this for your people and my people,” she said and began swimming into the mouth of danger.

“Let’s follow,” Jimmy joined hands with Elwin, and they moved through the water as quickly as Annison.

Jimmy had visited the Emerald Lake in a prior adventure but had not strayed far from the great waterfall. Annison led them to far distant parts of the Lake he had never seen before. The beauty of the lake was enhanced by the ripples the swimmers left in their wake. Those ripples gave off phosphorescent trails of rainbow-coloured bubbles. If it were not for the danger below them, Jimmy would have paused to enjoy the display, but he was aware of the threat and kept scanning below them for signs of serpents.

Elwin concentrated on following Annison’s trail. That trail came to an abrupt stop, and they caught up with the mermaid. She pointed directly down and told them, “If you look down, you will see in the depths the glow of red-hot magma.”

“That is where the serpent attacks have occurred most often.”

“Does that mean the serpents live in the magma?” asked an incredulous Jimmy.

“I have never seen them enter the vents, but there is nowhere else for them to go,” Annison explained. “However, you must excuse me now. My instructions are that I must return to my father as soon as I have shown you where this place lies.”

“Go, Annison. You have taken a great risk to get us this far. Off you go, and thank you,” Elwin said. “Jimmy and I must decide a plan of action now.”

She was on her way home with a wave and a splash from her tail. They watched the surface burst into colour around every ripple in Anniston’s wake.

There was no time for planning. As soon as Annison broke the surface, there was movement below them, in the vents. Then like an arrow, several of the beasts launched upward in pursuit of the hapless Annison. They had emerged

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from the red hot magma in response to the disturbance she created at the surface. They bypassed the two human forms who were stationary, hanging above them in the water. They had gained insight, but there was no time to analyse its meaning. Annison was directly in their line of attack, and the serpents were moving through the water at what seemed like hypersonic speed.

Jimmy noted that the long serpent-like body had two rows of lateral fins as they flashed by. The fins undulated at breakneck speed and propelled the serpents through the waters of the lake like guided missiles. The problem uppermost in Jimmy's mind was that the target they had locked onto was Annison.

"Elwin," he gasped.

"I can see what they are doing, Jimmy. They are headed straight for Annison.

"What can we do?"

Elwin replied. "The Witch's spells don't have any effect on them. I can't help Annison."

“I’ll have to do something,” Jimmy cried out. “I have to break out of your bubble and attempt to intercept it.”

“It’s moving too fast, Jimmy. You’ll never catch it.”



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## Chapter 9

Jimmy twisted the buckle on the sapphire belt Elwin had given him and kicked his way through the bubble.

The cold lake water flooded over him, and he found himself on the outside of Elwin's bubble with no air to breathe. Elwin thrust her hand through the bubble and told Jimmy to take a deep breath of air while he was still attached to her supply of oxygen. He took a single almighty breath and started kicking his feet as fast as he could.

Jimmy's red Attalian boots endowed him with fantastic speed over land, but he had never tried swimming while wearing them. The result was stupendous. From outside looking in, it appeared that Jimmy's feet beat the water so quickly his red boots were a blur, and he was driven through the water as if he was a nuclear-powered submarine.

Jimmy passed the surprised Serpent in seconds. He was moving so quickly the flames the serpent blew in his direction never reached him. Never letting up on his speed, he grabbed Annison by the waist and continued towards the blue waterfall in the Emerald Lake.

Annison was completely surprised to feel Jimmy's arms around her waist and to be dragged through the water faster than she had ever swum before. Jimmy pointed down into the depths where she saw the reason for their fleeing. The serpent was as determined to catch them. She looked into Jimmy's eyes and saw only a determination to get her to safety. But Jimmy's lungs were almost empty of any vestiges of air in his lungs. They had to surface, and quickly.

Jimmy gasped as soon as his head broke through the surface. He couldn't talk immediately, but his feet never stopped moving. He messaged Elwin to let her know their status, and he continued his course toward the pebbled beach close to the blue waterfall where most of the Aquamites were awaiting news with their chief, Milton.

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Following her exchange with Jimmy, Elwin was able to reach Milton telepathically. She advised him to get all the Aquamites out of the lake onto the foreshore.

Jimmy and Annison powered their way towards the waterfall, leaving a spreading wake behind them. They stayed ahead of the serpent by swimming like a porpoise. They moved faster underwater, and the sea monster missed them. They reached the pebbled beach, and their speed drove them a metre or two over the pebbles. Jimmy had turned onto his back with Annison on his chest so that he could protect her scales from rubbing raw on the stones.

They lay side by side, watching for the arrival of the serpent. Elwin arrived an instant before the monster. The thwarted serpent breathed out a long stream of flames towards Jimmy and Annison.

“Elwin,” Jimmy shouted. “Use your magic. Stop it.”

“My magic does not affect serpents, Jimmy.”

“But you can freeze the water around us,” Jimmy told Elwin.

“That might work, Jimmy. It will be spell directed at the lake, not at the serpent.”

“Please do it, Elwin,” Jimmy pleaded.

Elwin appeared to grow taller, chanting her unintelligible spell as she grew. She hovered over the serpent with her arms spread wide, still issuing flaming blasts towards the Aquamites. The Aquamites cringed away for the flames and edged ever higher up the shore. The heat began to dry out their scales, and some flaked off, leaving bright red patches of skin where the burnt scales had fallen away.

At first, a mist appeared, and it floated, spreading over the water's surface. The ripples in the surface disappeared to be replaced by a thin sheet of flakey ice. The flakes joined together, and the ice grew thicker. The Aquamites huddled closer and closer together, shivering in the cold air.

Elwin's shadow covered the serpent and left the Aquamites free to recover on the shore. The serpent ceased breathing fire towards the Aquamites and closed its long body into coils that began to wrap around itself. It was losing too

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much body heat to survive the icy conditions. It plunged into the depths with a last roar and retreated to its lair in search of warmth.

Elwinn rematerialized on the foreshore as soon as the serpent disappeared. The ice started to melt, and the Aquamites felt the change in the ambient temperature. They stopped shivering and moved cautiously toward the edge of the lake.

“How will we ever be free of this diabolical threat?” Milton asked of no one in particular.

Elwin answered. “The four guardian witches with Lord Oron, Apprentice Jade and even the brains of Attalia are all working on a solution which will restore peace to the Emerald Lake, Milton. We shall succeed.

“One of the plans being considered needs bait to attract the serpents to the surface of the lake. If we can attract all of them to the surface, we can freeze them into inactivity.”

Jimmy added, “Once we capture the monsters in the ice, we need a way to get them out of the Emerald cavern. We

need to get them into the sea. I only know one route, Milton. The one we used to get the giant eel back into the sea via the tunnels at the top of the blue waterfall. Somehow, we have to attract all the serpents out of their lairs and entice them into the lake's surface waters.

“Elwin and her friends can then freeze them, but after that, we have to get them into the sea. It will be too big a package to squeeze through the same tunnels we used to free Olsen, the eel. Is there any alternative route?”

“I don't know of one, Jimmy. Does anyone here?” Milton asked.

The response to the question was silence for at least half a minute before Annison responded. “A few of the younger Aquamites have found how to reach the surface of the sea.”

“Never,” Milton disagreed vigorously.

“Father,” pleaded Annison, “you cannot keep our youngsters restricted to just the Emerald Lake. It is in their very nature to explore beyond their home shores.”

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“I only want everyone to be safe,” Milton said.

“The young Aquamites are always careful,” Annison explained, “But every young person wants to know what lies around the next corner.

“And what they have found is a vast world covered by seas that go on and on until you end up where you started.”

“Will you show me the route you have found?” Elwin asked. “It could be the answer we have been seeking. There are just so many imponderables in our supposed plan to capture all the serpents.”

“Only if I have father’s permission.”

“Of course, you have my permission Annison. The fate of all Aquamites depends on Elwin getting rid of the serpents.”

“Thank you, Milton,” Jimmy said and turned to Elwin. “Can we follow Annison together in your bubble?”

“Not a problem, Jimmy. When do we go, Annison?”

“As soon as you want,” she replied.

“Now’s as good a time as any,” Elwin said. “Stand closer, Jimmy. I’ll call for the bubble protection.”

And with a wave of her wand, Elwin created the spell that enclosed them both in the watertight shell, which would keep them together as they dived into the lake. They followed the trail of bubbles left by Annison. She swam ever deeper into the green waters and headed for the base of the waterfall’ The emerald green waters of the lake were stirred by the blue water that fell from the roof of the cavern to create the cavern-wide waterfall.

The constant battering by the falling water had scooped out a deep channel in the rocks at the base of the waterfall. Annison swam along the channel to the point where it almost met the shore. Then with one enormous flick of her long tail, she disappeared.

Elwin looked at Jimmy in askance, shrugged her shoulders and followed the same diving route. The rocks were rubbed smooth by the falling water, and when Elwin reached the bottom, the strong current carried them deeper and then



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under the smoothed edges of the rocks. Once under the full force of the waterfall, the current carried them up in a channel. The current carried them at an incredible speed a further half a kilometre along the channel, then rose vertically into a great air-filled void.

Annison swam back to Elwin and pointed towards an area of the void where the light grew brighter. "That is the opening between our world and the great seas beyond. It is an enormous archway that is invisible from the outside because the sea reaches the top of the opening. From the outside, this looks like any other extinct volcano."

Jimmy thanked Annison for showing them the route. "That's half the problem resolved, Elwin. If we can get the serpents to gather here."

Elwin released Jimmy from her bubble, and he swam across the lake to the archway of an entrance. Elwin and Annison followed, and they made the shallow dive under the archway and emerged into the ocean. They bobbed on the

waves and looked around. The only feature they could see was the volcano's mountainous shell.

"When the time comes," Jimmy said, "I need to be able to spot this volcano from the sky."

"I think you are jumping too far ahead," Elwinn said. "I agree, the lake under the volcanic cone would be the ideal place to freeze the serpents, but indeed, the biggest problem is to persuade all the reptiles to gather together in this one spot?"

"If they were all here, it would not be difficult for any of the witches to mark out this spot with a column of smoke rising out of the cone."

No one questioned Jimmy about why he needed to spot this volcano. They were more concerned about attracting the serpents to this spot.

"Let's head back to Milton in the Emerald Lake," suggested Elwinn. "Perhaps he can suggest a solution."

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## Chapter 10

“So, you have confirmed that there is a route to the great oceans beyond our Emerald Lake,” Milton spoke to Elwin, sitting by the edge of that very lake.

“Annison guided us directly there, Milton. Once anyone swims into the opening at the base of the Blue Waterfall, the currents will carry them directly into the volcano’s shell.”

“Now you have confirmed that there is a way, Elwin. All we have to do is to persuade the serpents to go there.”

“But, of course, the serpents won’t just move in that direction just because we want them to,” Jimmy interrupted their exchange. “We will have to lure them like a fisherman uses a worm on a hook to lure the fish into chasing and biting

the hook. The serpents do not appear interested in anything as small as a worm. The only bait that they seem to be interested in eating is the flesh of humans or Aquamites.”

“We know they have a taste for Aquamites, Jimmy,” Milton said .” They have eaten more of us than I care to admit. It seems that I cannot protect my people.”

“Father,” objected Annison. “No one has ever seen such beasts before. We have no weapons other than our tridents to protect ourselves, and the serpents are so swift they easily evade any attack. “

“I have seen first-hand how quickly the serpents move, Annison,” Jimmy said. “But more importantly, I also saw how quickly you were able to move when they chased us. You easily outstripped them.”

“I think fear added a few metres-per-second to my fastest sprint time,” Annison admitted.

“But the fact is that you were able to stay ahead of their jaws. What we need is a few more Aquamites who can swim just as quickly as you did, Annison.

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“There are plenty of young men who can easily match my speed,” Annison exclaimed.

“Jimmy,” admonished Milton. “I think I know where your thoughts are going with this. You want our strongest and bravest young Aquamites to be the bait. To attract the serpents to follow them to the volcano’s lake. I cannot authorise such a risky strategy. The Aquamites will be devoured in an instant if the serpents catch up with them.”

“It may be risky, father, but surely we should give everyone a chance to at least consider the plan.” Annison turned to Jimmy, “And is it your idea for the witches to trap the serpents in ice at the surface of the volcano lake.”

Elwinn answered. “We will also seek the assistance of our whole coven of witches, including Lord Oron. He may be able to enter the volcano shell in his Weather Cloud and bring extra freezing power.”

“Great thinking, Elwin.” Jimmy outlined what his plan was “Once the serpents are locked in ice, my starship could net them together and carry them all deep into outer space

where the ice would never melt. They would be imprisoned there for all time.”.

Milton was looking very agitated. “I cannot allow our young Aquamtes to risk their lives in this wild plan.”

“You must allow our people to choose for themselves,” countered Annison.

Vanata, Milton’s lifelong companion, had remained quiet up to this point. But she now added her voice to the discussion. “I agree with your daughter, Milton. Our people are being picked off one by one by these stealthy serpents who are growing more and more confident after every successful attack. It would be best if you gave our young people the option. No one else has offered a plan with the slightest chance of success. This plan may offer our only chance to survive.”

Milton lifted his head and looked Vanata straight in the eye..”! knew there was a good reason for choosing you as my soulmate, Vanata. You always make sense.” He turned to

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Elwin and said, “We need a little while to consult with all the Aquamites, Elwinn.”

“And we need to coordinate our plan with Matilda,” Jimmy said. “And we need to find a net big enough and strong enough to carry the load of all the serpents.”

“Elwinn will need support from all the witches to come up with an alternative if the young Aquamites disagree with our plan to use them as bait.”

Annison overheard their exchange and swam up onto the pebbles until she was nose to nose with Jimmy. “Do not underestimate the abilities and the determination of young Aquamites.”

Jimmy’s skin prickled, and every hair on his arms stood to attention. He had never felt intimidated by a female ever before. Jimmy could only stare into the brightest, deep blue eyes he had ever seen. Elwin recognised what had passed between the two young people, and she rescued Jimmy from his tongue-tied amazement.

“Will you be able to guide your starship to the volcano shell?” Elwinn asked Jimmy.

With enormous effort, Jimmy took his eyes from Annison and transferred his attention to Elwinn. “I am certain that my navigator XRU will be able to find the dead volcano, particularly if Elwinn can create a plume of smoke rising from the extinct crater.”

“Who is XRU?” Annison asked.

“XRU is not an actual person. He is an advanced computer from my home planet of Attalia.”

Annison would never understand the concept of Artificial Intelligence or computers or starships, so Jimmy tried to change the subject.

“I have discovered that I can outswim the serpents but only if I have sufficient air in my lungs. If I stay on the surface, not only can I keep breathing, but my feet can paddle up and down so quickly that I can easily stay ahead of the serpents.

“My problems start when I have to stay underwater for any length of time. I don’t have gills to help me breathe



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underwater like the Aquamites. Not unless I am in the same bubble as Elwinn."

"That's all we have time for at the moment," Elwinn said. "We need to consult with our fellow witches while Milton consults with his people. We'll be back just as quickly as we can. Come. Jimmy. Let's join hands. We'll soon be back at Matilda's house."

No sooner said than done. They were homeward bound, clothed in a single bundle of Elwin's spell. Everything passed by so quickly Jimmy could not make out individual shapes, just a kaleidoscope of changing colours. Jimmy was at ease when travelling between stars and even between different dimensions, but he did not have Elwinn's power to move as one with the water's flow. They became disembodied entities carried along without friction until they emerged from the stream that ran behind Matilda's house on the hill.

There was no greeting from Matilda, Ira, or Floella, not even Lord Oron. There was serious business to attend to.

## Chapter 11

**“Y**our plan will only work if the Aquamites decide to risk the lives of their best swimmers,” Matilda pointed out.

Jimmy jumped in, “If Annison is typical of the spirit of the Aquamites, there will be an excess of young volunteers to act as bait for the serpents.”

“I’m sure you are right, Jimmy, but it is a hazardous manoeuvre,” Elwinn expressed her concern.

“The fact remains,” said the Weatherman, “there are almost certainly going to be casualties.”

“I think they know that Lord Oron, but what choice do they have? They must try to lure the serpents to the surface where the combined forces of the witches can fast freeze them, trapping them in ice.”

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“They have to be trapped in the right place, in the lake at the centre of the extinct volcano. Then we have to collect them together in a strong net. Do you know where we can find a suitable net?”

Lord Oron replied. “In a single word, Jimmy. No.”

The gathered witches were silent in their cogitations. None had come across a fishing vessel using nets that could hold twenty or thirty serpents or more. No one knew for sure. All the fishing nets they had encountered were made from a natural sisal type of fibre spun into string and rope.

“The serpents may be able to burn through sisal netting,” Jimmy agreed. “And we don’t have sufficient lengths of wire to make a metal net. What other material can we access.”

The apprentice witch had been quiet up to that point, but now, as if someone had prodded her, Jade waded into the conversation. “There is one material I know of that is all around us which is lighter than silk and stronger than steel.”

The coven looked at each other with shoulder shrugs of askance. "Whatever are you referring to?" Matilda asked.

Jimmy looked at Jade knowingly. "Tell us all, Jade."

"Strands that are as light as a feather but as strong as steel are produced every day, all over the world: spider's webs.

No one responded. "It's one thing knowing that it is the web of spiders," Jade continued, "But I have no idea how to collect enough to make a net."

"I don't think we could collect enough to make a net," Matilda said. "It would all stick together if we tried to make a roll of the web."

"There may be another way," Jimmy offered. "If you can persuade enough huge spiders to spin their webs on a giant sheet of paper. It has to be the right size and shape, but when you roll it up, the web won't stick to itself."

"Wow, Jimmy!" Jade gasped. "That's a great idea, but won't the breath of the serpent easily burn through a spiders web?"

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“Not after I sprayed it with my spell of non-flammability,” Matilda said, looking very pleased with herself.

“And where will you find a piece of paper the right shape and size to hold the web that must hold perhaps more than twenty serpents? ”

“Mere details,” Matilda responded.

“Can you?” queried Elwinn.

“Of course, she can,” countered Floella.

“Of course, I can,” Matilda confirmed.

“But if serpents could burn through sisal netting, they will easily burn a hole through a spider’s web net,” pointed out Lord Oron.

Matilda replied. “But serpents cannot generate such a fierce a flame if they are frozen in a block of ice.”

“That makes sense, Matilda,” Jimmy agreed. “But I have seen from Elwinn’s effort that it takes a while to get the magic flowing. Water does not freeze around the serpents instantaneously.”

“So?” Matilda queried.

There was no response from the gathering.

“This time, Elwinn will be accompanied by a further three witches, one apprentice and Lord Oron if he can get his cloud to the extinct volcano. I assure you that there is more magical power in this group than has ever been seen on Earth.”

“Wow! Matilda,” Jimmy gasped. “You will be unstoppable. But how do you all manage to follow Elwinn under the surface of the lake?”

Matilda laughed. “How little you know of our powers, Jimmy. Never underestimate the power carried by a coven of witches.” She admonished Jimmy for doubting. “What one witch can do, all the others can link into that witch’s abilities. The combination of four witches, one apprentice and the Weatherman, will be a formidable power.

“Our concern, Jimmy, is how we can scoop them out of the volcano’s lake, in the net and carry them safely into the airless world of ultracold, keeping them frozen for all time.”

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“My starship has the power to lift and carry the serpents once we catch them in the net. The size of the opening from the volcano lake into the great ocean might be a problem.”

“Do not worry yourself on that score,” Elwinn said. If we have to blast the cone off the volcano, then that’s what we will do.”

“Details, details,” Matilda muttered. “I need a few more minutes to train Jade how to cast the freezing spell before we are ready to go.”

“You need to give me plenty of time to get the Weather Cloud into position, said Lord Oron. “Both Jimmy and I need a smoke signal to show us where this volcano is.

. Who will make the smoke signal?”

“I will,” said Elwinn, “as I move faster than any other in the water. Once I am there, it’s a simple spell to make smoke.”

“We are getting ahead of ourselves, friends,” Matilda said. “We must first collect plenty of giant spiders to make the web netting. The best spiders are found near Jimmy’s home

on upper Earth. We need a spell to attract them into a few jars. Then bring them to me.

“ In the meanwhile, I will create a template out of rice paper and work out how to fold it together so that when Jimmy unfolds it, it will make as big a net as we need to carry twenty or more serpents.”

“Then, when we get the volcano lake, I can unfold a net big enough to hold the serpents,” Jimmy concluded.

Jade knew the spell to call for the spiders. She carried two wide-mouthed jars, and Jimmy managed four.: two around his waist, with two around his neck.

Jimmy carried Jade piggyback style to the bottom of the cliff where the hole that led to the upper world began. His red Attalian boots sped them over the ground to the bottom of the hole. He had to be careful not to crash the glass jars together. Jade led the way up the gap between tree roots and emerged inside the forest's upper world. As soon as Jimmy stood beside her, they walked a little deeper into the woods, found a clearing, arranged the jars in a tight circle, and stood back.



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Jade waved her juvenile witch's wand and chanted an ancient spell.

For a moment or two, nothing stirred. And then the forest appeared to move, en masse. The leaves of the trees vibrated as thousands of spiders began their descent to the forest floor. Jade hung on tight, wrapping her arms around Jimmy's waist. Neither of them had seen such a collection of giant spiders scabbling to get into the glass jars.

Only then did Jimmy realise there were no lids on the jars. Most of the spiders were black, and a single spider spanned the width of an adult's hand with its eight long legs. The ground was covered inches deep by a mass of crawling beasties. Their eyes reflected the remaining light multiple times from many multifaceted lenses.

Jade untangled herself from around Jimmy, found her wand and waved it again. The spiders responded and seemed to shuffle around the jars pushing the smallest specimens towards the outer edge. The enormous creatures jumped into the jars. They arranged themselves on top of each other until

every jar was filled to the brim. Then the spiders settled down as if awaiting their next command. Those that did not fit into the jars just dispersed into the forest with an uncanny rustling noise of grasses and leaves.

Jimmy and Jade gathered up the jars and carefully slung the string handles around their waists and necks when every jar was full. The black beasties were inches away from their faces, but the spiders made no aggressive moves even though the open-topped jars were swinging and bumping into each other at every step. As they descended to Roombelow, Jimmy was little worried that a jar might be upturned, releasing its load into the blackness of the hole. He was relieved when they reached the bottom of the hole without losing a single spider.

With Jade sitting on his shoulders and her legs wrapped around his neck, Jimmy strode giant steps to take them quickly back to Matilda's house.

"Welcome, my little friends," Matilda bowed to the six jars of giant, black spiders. "I have a special task for you that

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only you can perform. I need you to spin the biggest and strongest web that has ever been made.”

The spiders chittered and chatted as they spread out from their glass jars. They raised themselves on their hairy hind legs as if they were at attention.

“Of course, I know you can spin strong webs, but I need you to interlock all the webs together as one,” Matilda responded to their chattering. “And I need the webs to be laid out on the large rice paper template. It’s lying on the ground at the back of the house. I will lay the web out on the paper, and then I’ll fold the rice paper into a package so that no two sides of the web touch each other. The layers will be separated by a second rice paper template so that no two parts of the web can stick together. That will make the smallest packaging for the biggest net. When you deploy the net to capture the serpents, the rice paper will dissolve in water, and you’ll have a spider web net as strong as steel.” Jimmy added his requirement. “Matilda, please tell them I need a long length of web so that I can drag the net behind SR3.”

“Jimmy,” Matilda said, “the spiders won’t know what a starship is. I only need to tell them how long the drag cord should be.”

“Of course, Matilda. I think a drag cord rolled around a cylindrical coil needs to be at least ten metres long.”

“So it shall be, Jimmy. The spiders won’t let us down.”

And the spiders went immediately to work. The spinnerets attached to their abdomens shot streams of silky web into an interlocking net.

No one had ever gone fishing with a spider’s web before. Would it be strong enough to carry the serpents into the upper atmosphere?

Jimmy returned to his home in the mayor’s house in the centre of Roombelow. Amanda and Mr McDonald were brought up to date while they ate dinner. They knew better than to admonish their surrogate son for risking his life to save others once again. They knew that that was just the way Jimmy was. He placed the safety of others before his own always. And so far in his short

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life, it usually worked out. People just had to trust in the abilities of the boy from Attalia.

## Chapter 12

As soon as the sun had risen, Jimmy met his friends at Matilda's house on the hill. The Weatherman had moored his Cloudin front of her house. The other members of the magic circle of friends were just finishing off their morning dose of Matilda's brew. Jimmy accepted a glass from Matilda and drained it in one gulp. Matilda's mixture would keep everyone's mind at its sharpest throughout the day.

Matilda spoke. "The net is complete, Jimmy. The spiders have returned to their worlds above. I have expertly wrapped the net into a small bundle which Lord Oron will carry aboard his Cloud. It would be foolish to risk damaging it by taking it up the hole to the Esh village forest.

"The net has a high tensile strength to carry heavy loads, but it will not withstand any shearing stress. If a single

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strand got caught on a root in the hole, it might easily stretch and snap.”

“It makes perfect sense for Lord Oron to carry it in his cloud, folded as it is,” Jimmy agreed. “So, you will get to the volcano through the lake in Lithnia, which also gives access to the great ocean. Once there, we will have to find and meet up at a volcano, which neither of us knows where its location is.”

“In all the world,” Floella said, “there is sure to be more than one volcano issuing smoke from its crater.

“Surely,” Jade suggested, “whoever makes the smoke can also control the colour?”

“That was always my plan,” Matilda said.

Jimmy shared his knowing smile with Jade. As chief witch, Matilda would never allow herself to be upstaged, particularly by her apprentice.

Elwinn spoke up. “If I am the one to make the volcano smoke, there is only one colour to distinguish our volcano. It has to be blue.”

“But, surely,” asked Ira, “Jimmy and the Weatherman will not be able to see blue smoke against a background of blue sky?”

“Believe me,” responded Elwinn. “no one will mistake my blue smoke for the sky.”

“As Elwinn will be one of the first to get to the volcano’s lake, it makes sense for her to identify the location,” Matilda confirmed. “Ira can roam the sky watching for the sign. As soon as we spot the volcano, we must all get inside to support the freezing process.

Lord Oron explained his part in the proceedings “I will station my cloud above the cone ready to release the net, and I can also add freezing conditions from the Cloud”.

“SR3 will be positioned above the volcano under XRU’s control until we can capture all the serpents in the net. When everything is secured,” Jimmy said, “XRU will lower SR3 down into the volcano to pick up the net and carry it to the edge of space.”



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Lord Oron asked, “Will the net full of serpents pass through the cone?”

“We won’t know until we try it, Jimmy said. ”That is as good a plan as we can come up with at, at this stage. We don’t know how the Aquamites plan to lure the serpents will work out until we get there”.

“Further talking will only delay us,” Matilda said. “Let us get going. Now.”

Jimmy pleaded with the coven. “Will you please wait just one more hour?”

“Why?” Matilda asked.

“I want to travel with you. My starship can be programmed to follow the plan by XRU. He is the computer/navigator with AI – artificial intelligence.”

“I think, Jimmy, that this has more to do with watching over your new friend Annison,” Matilda said with a sly nudge of Jimmy’s shoulder.

“Of course, it isn’t,” Jimmy said, adding hurriedly, “! Only want to know what their plan is to lure the serpents unto the volcano’s lake.”

Surprisingly Matlida quoted Shakespeare at Jimmy. “Me thinks he doth object too much.”

“Dear sister,” Elwinn quietly chided Matilda, “please don’t make him any more uncomfortable than he already is. Jimmy has love in his heart that he may never fulfil. Young men have to learn these things for themselves.”

“Well said, Elwinn. I will hold my council. No one should hold a boy’s hand while he woos another.”

Jimmy could not hear this exchange between two old friends. He turned to Lord Oron and suggested that he wait at the exit of Lithnia, where its lake met the ocean. “SR3 can hover much higher in the sky than your cloud, and XRU will be able to spot the volcano when Elwinn creates the blue smoke.

“Almost certainly, that volcano will lie in the South Seas. There are more extinct volcanos in that part of the ocean than anywhere else on Earth.”

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“I agree,” Lord Oron replied, “and as soon as SR3 moves, I will follow.”

“The problem is,” warned Floella, “that we all need to be in position before the serpents arrive in the volcano’s lake. It will need all our combined powers to freeze the lake fast the moment the serpents arrive.”

“There are many links in the chain of events that need to happen sequentially,” Matilda agreed. “We have a plan, but every part needs to come together for it to work.

“Now give me a little time to teach Jade the freezing spell, and then we can begin the process.

“Elwinn will need to set off first with Jimmy,” Matilda concluded.

“We have to programme SR3 first,” Jimmy explained and turned to Elwinn. “Can you get us there quickly, Elwinn?”

Elwinn replied, “I think you can run there quicker than I can move through Earth’s natural water channel, Jimmy. I don’t have a direct channel to the Esh forest.”

“I’ll get back here as fast as I can,” Jimmy said, and in a blurred flash, he was on his way. He climbed up the hole that led to the Esh the forest floor faster than before.

Once located in SR3’s control room, he quickly updated XRU with their plan. XRU was one of the most advanced pieces of electronics on Earth. Nothing needed to be repeated, and the details were locked in his memory.

XRU took control and fired up the starship’s drive engines, ready to take to the skies as soon as Jimmy disembarked.

Jimmy sped back to Roombelow. There was no time to visit Aunt Ether, his first surrogate mother. He would make the time when peace returned.

“I’m back,” Jimmy announced as he entered Matilda’s house. “And I’m ready to unite with you, Elwinn, in your bubble, just as soon as you say.”. He turned to his friends and bid. Matilda, Lord Oron, Jade, Floella a fond, “Goodbye. We’ll meet up again at the volcano when Elwinn sets the blue smoke marker.

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“Everyone is relying on your freezing spell to capture the serpents in a block of ice before they can do any damage to anyone.”

“Lord Oron will chill the air and the water so that once the serpents follow the Aquamites into the volcano’s pool, our magic will work even quicker,” Matilda said.

“And then with everybody contributing, we should have them trapped in ice pretty quickly,” Lord Oron added. “After that, it all depends on our friend from Attalia to capture them in the spider’s web net and drag them to where they can do no further harm.”

“There are so many parts of the plan that have to come together at the right times,” Jimmy said. “All it will take is one mistake, and everything will fall apart.”

“Have some faith, Jimmy. Every member of Earth’s guardians is involved in this plan. We will not fail.

“Elwinn, you start now, with Jimmy,” Matilda instructed the coven. “The rest of us will join Lord Oron in his Weather Cloud, and we’ll meet you at the Volcano.”

“I will make it easy for you to find it,” Elwinn said as Jimmy stepped into Elwinn’s magical sphere.

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## Chapter 13

Elwinn's bubble began the journey to the Aquamite's emerald lake in the stream behind Matilda's house. As before, Jimmy was an integral part of the entity which enclosed him and Elwinn in a meta state of togetherness, as one entity, moving through the molecular structure of water. Invisible to outside eyes Elwinn sped to the base of the blue waterfall in the Emerald Lake.

In only a few moments, first Milton followed by Vanata and Annison, and then fifteen or more Aquamites gathered in front of Jimmy and Elwinn. Jimmy had to stop himself from staring at the beauty of Annison. She acknowledged his attention by lowering her eyes.

There was an almost mix of male and female Aquamites. They were all crowned with long blonde, almost white hair.

The females sported flowing locks which reached to their waists. The males' hair hung over their ears. None wore clothing, but there was no embarrassment among them. Their bodies melded into glorious golden fishtail fins. Their uniqueness and beauty were evident. They hardly looked like possible warriors intent on repelling fire breathing serpents

"Who among you will brave the challenge to entice the serpents out of their fiery lair?" Asked Elwinn.

Vanata replied, "There were more volunteers than ever we would dare risk. These, in front of you, were selected as best for the task: our fastest swimmers. We believe that they can all outswim the serpents."

Elwinn cast her eyes over the gathered youthful Aquamites. "I can see the resolve in each of your hearts. Milton has chosen wisely. But I must warn you that as well as speed, you will also need the stamina to stay ahead of the serpents until you reach the volcano's lake.

"The water will be icy cold because my sister witches and Lord Oron, the Weatherman, should have started the cooling



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process well ahead of your arrival. The moment you reach the lake, head for the shore and pull yourselves clear of the water. We don't want to accidentally freeze an Aquamite in the same block of ice as a serpent."

Nervous laughter rippled through the young Aquamites.

"That is when Jimmy will engulf the serpents in the biggest strongest net ever manufactured on Earth. A net made from spider's webs stitched together."

"What happens then?" Annison asked.

"Jimmy intends to tow the net, full of serpents, beyond Earth's atmosphere, even beyond the moon, to a place so cold the serpents will never wake up."

"Isn't that dangerous? My teachers said that there is no air to breathe when you reach so high in the sky," Annison asked Jimmy apprehensively. "How will you survive?"

"I shall be using my starship SR3, which comes from my home planet Attalia. SR3 creates oxygen for me to keep breathing."

Although Annison did not know what a starship was, she was satisfied that if Jimmy said so, it would be so. She breathed a sigh of relief.

Elwinn spoke. "The Witch Guardians and the Weatherman's cloud are almost at the exit of the Diamites world. They will need to find your extinct volcano, which lies in a chain of volcanic islands in the South Seas."

"How will you mark the right volcanic crater?" Annison asked.

"I need you to take me there, now," Elwinn responded. "We need the cooling of the lake's waters to begin as soon as possible. The colder it is when the serpents arrive, the quicker our magic will trap them in ice."

"Show me the way, Annison. The rest of you, please wait in this area until we return. Your task will begin as soon as we return."

Annison dived into the blue water that spilled into the lake from the waterfall, and Jimmy and Elwinn followed, wrapped in Elwinn's bubble. They plunged deep, following

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Annison to the waterfall's base before the current caught them and then swept them upwards. Their heads broke the surface simultaneously, and they swam towards the low arch that gave entry to the ocean.

Elwinn was only interested in setting her spell to generate blue smoke through the volcano's cone high into the surrounding sky. She stood on the rock-strewn shore and raised her arms in a circling arc that ended with her fingers pointing towards the volcanic cone's apex. She repeated and repeated the chant and her actions, time and time again. Just as Jimmy was beginning to think that Elwinn had chewed off more than she could manage, the first thin swirl of blue smoke rose from the lake and headed straight for the sky.

"That's not enough," moaned Elwinn. "The smoke will disappear in the blue of the sky. I need to put more effort into it."

Spellbound on the shore, Jimmy stood watching as Elwinn upped her energy output and the volume of her chant. The noise, which no one could describe as melodic,

reverberated in the echo chamber of the empty volcanic cone. Elwinn generated more smoke, and her hands pointed at the opening in the cone. Her whole body rose off the ground and rotated a metre above the lake's surface. Elwinn generated even more smoke in a swirling mixture containing every shade of blue. The smoke rose directly from Elwinn's fingertips, perpendicularly through the volcano's opening and twined its way up to the heavens.

"That's better," she said, self-congratulating her efforts.

"It's magnificent," agreed Jimmy.

"I've never seen anything like it," Annison voiced in wonderment.

"I just need to hear from Matilda that the rest of the team has seen it, then we begin the next part of our plan."

Jimmy had not even noticed that he had wrapped his arm around Annison's shoulders. Annison enjoyed the proximity of this fantastic person from beyond her world. She had snuggled a little closer. And at that moment, Jimmy's heart soared as high as the smoke created by Elwinn.

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At which point, Elwinn ceased her spell making and privately smiled, a little sadly, at the sight of her most favourite extraterrestrial being, falling head over heels for a companion he could never be with for the rest of his. They were from two separate and very different worlds.

In only the twinkling of an eye, the mood was broken when Elwinn announced, "Matilda has sent a message that she has spotted my signal. Lord Oron estimates his cloud will reach us in less than thirty minutes. We must return to The Emerald Lake to begin the most dangerous part of the plan.

"Come on, love birds, we need to get back quickly."

Annison slipped into the lake without even looking at Jimmy. Jimmy joined hands with Elwinn and again became part of her bubble. Together they headed back and soon addressed the Aquamites in the Emerald Lake.

Milton buried his personal feelings and chose which of the youngsters would best take on the challenge of enticing the serpents out of their volcanic lair. "May I make a suggestion, Milton?" Jimmy asked.

“Of course, Jimmy. We appreciate your assistance,” Milton acquiesced.

“I do not doubt that each Aquamite you have chosen can outswim a serpent, but the route from their lair to the volcano is long. The slightest slowing will allow them to catch us up.

“I suggest that you divide the swimmers into two groups. The first group will flaunt their skills before the fissures where the serpents lurk. That will use up a lot of their energy. Who knows if they have the stamina to stay ahead of the danger to the volcano's lake?

“Let half of the volunteers stay in hiding in the Emerald Lake until the first group pursued by serpents arrives at the bottom of the waterfall. The second group can take over being the prey among the bubbles and mixing the blue water with the lake's emerald water.

“The second group will be fresh and can lead the serpents into the volcanic lake's waters. When the serpents hit the cold water created by the witches and the Weatherman, they will be slowed down tremendously. That will give our

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second group just enough time to pull themselves onto the rocks so that the witches can fast freeze the lake. Do you agree?"

Milton gave it but a moment's consideration. "Excellent plan, Jimmy. All in favour?"

There were nodding heads all around. They had decided.

Santana's strength made him the obvious choice to lead the first group. No one could outpace Annison in the water, and she would be leading the second group.

Before the serpents arrived, Jimmy and Elwinn had to be in the volcano's cone. Jimmy had to be there to deploy the net and Elwinn to add her magic strength to the freezing spell.

Everything was in place. It was a complicated plan where many actions needed to come together at just the right time. All it required was a single screw to come loose, and everything would collapse like a tower of dominoes.

## Chapter 14

**J**immy joined in Elwinn's bubble, and they made their way through the blue waterfall to the extinct volcano.

Santana dived deep into the emerald waters and led half a dozen of the younger Aquamites down, deep to the floor of the Emerald Lake. Annison split the remaining Aquamites into two groups. She led one of the groups to the left-hand side of the waterfall, and Celina led the second group to the right-hand side.

The Aquamites acting as bait for the serpents split left and right when they entered the waterfall. Then the two much fresher groups joined the fray to lead the chasing serpents towards the volcano's lake. They hoped that in the heat of the chase, the reptiles would not notice that their prey had changed.



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Annison and Celina broke free from their hiding places at the bottom of the waterfall and led the serpents towards the volcano's crater.

Changing teams had not delayed the swimmers, but somehow the serpents had gained on the Aquamites. One, in particular, was two or three metres longer than all the others, and it was gaining on its targeted prey. Celina could feel the heat of the serpent's fiery breath on her tail. Next came the excruciating pain as the serpent took a chunk of flesh out of her tail. Blood spurted from the wound and seemed to give the chasing serpents an extra kick of energy. They sped up.

Celina's tail could not beat the water as powerfully as it had because of the gaping hole the serpent had taken out of her tail. The giant serpent was gaining on her with every beat of her tail. The bleeding from her wounded tail fin stopped because the flames from the serpent's mouth seared her wound closed. Annison turned to see where Celina had gone. She took in the situation at a single glance and turned to help her stricken colleague.

With no thought for her safety, Annison swam back, directly into the range of the serpents snapping jaws. She took hold of Celina's outstretched hand and pulled with all her might. Annison catapulted Celina to safety, but that left Annison directly in the path of the demon.

Even Annison's fantastic swimming speed was no match for the reaction of the serpent. She cried out as flames roasted her tail, and it curled up into a useless, blackened mess. Celina turned and saw Annison's plight. She grabbed the arm of the closest Aquamite, Santana, a teenage Aquamite who happened to be almost as strong as Coran and headed back to Annison.

In that fraction of a moment, the serpent had taken an enormous chunk out of Annison lower body. Celina and Santana each took Annison's arms and swam as though the devil was pursuing them into the lake at the extinct volcano.

The serpents sensed that they were losing their food and shot out an enormous blast of flame, which engulfed all three Aquamites. When the smoke cleared, Jimmy was

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relieved to see that the three Aquamites had successfully reached the shore's safety and pulled out onto the surrounding rocks as quickly as they could. All three were injured, but there were only superficial burns on Santana, Coran and Celina. Fortunately, Annison was thankfully unconscious and unaware of her injuries. She might never swim again if ever she recovered.

Jimmy was heartbroken, but he had to keep it to himself while he concentrated on the final task. He had already uncoiled the net and spread it out on the floor of the lake. He had tied the long leader to SR3 and wrapped it around the tail fins twice for safety. XRU was awaiting Jimmy's signal to rise into the air. That would tighten the trap around the serpents caught in the net.

The serpents were gathering together in the centre of the lake, attempting to huddle together to keep warm. They were in the very place that Jimmy needed them to be. He was sure the net would capture them all. The witches stood on the shore, projecting their spells towards the lake's surface.

Lord Oron stationed the Weather Cloud above the volcano directing blasts of cold air down into the hollow void.

At a signal from Matilda, everyone increased the power they were throwing into the lake and the lake iced over. Elwinn called on her ancestor's to add their energy to her spell, and the air turned blue with cold. Ira turned the cold air into crystals of ice, which settled on the lake's surface. Floella stood with Jade, and they added their power to the magic that filled the volcano.

Jimmy had captured a hundred or more serpents that the witches had trapped in the ball of ice. Jimmy gave the signal, and XRU piloted SR3 higher into the sky. The ice ball lifted clear of the lake's surface, but it was evident to Jimmy that the ball would never fit through the mouth of the volcano.

"XRU!" Jimmy shouted. "Hold everything where it is. The ice ball won't get through the neck of the volcano."

There was a moment or two's silence. Matilda interrupted the quiet. "Jimmy, we will not be able to hold this

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freezing power for much longer. It is draining our energy too quickly.”

XRU addressed Matilda. “Madam Witch, please try to hold the serpents for a few more minutes. I have a plan.”

Unexpectedly Matilda did as XRU asked. She acknowledged XRU’s superior knowledge. “Go ahead,” Matilda said. And she called to her sisters., “dig deeply into your energy reserves. We must keep the spell active for as long as we can.”

“Thank you, Matilda,” Jimmy said. “Will you lift me into SR3, XRU?”

“Dropping a hoist for you now,” XRU responded., and immediately a wire line and hook were lowered to Jimmy. As soon as the loop was secured around his waist, he was quickly hoisted into SR3. Sat in the Commander’s seat General Commander Jimmy McGellan outlined his plan.

“I need to fire the laser with great precision, XRU.”

“As always, Commander.”

"I need to widen the opening into the heart of the volcano. The top of the arch is just visible above the line."

"That should be straightforward," XRU responded.

"Certainly, XRU. It sounds straightforward, but there are four witches inside the cone and three Aquamites. We cannot just blast an opening. I needed you to set the power so that we just cut through the rock. We don't want any debris flying around that could injure anyone."

"Not a problem, Commander."

"Then, I'll widen the gap at the entrance and cut a slit up to the top of the cone."

"Not too complicated," XRU responded.

"The complication is that we need to keep clear of injuring our friends, and secondly, the laser must not cut into our spider web net nor the length of lead line which attaches the net to SR3."

"That's all doable, for me, that is. When do we start?"

"Immediately, XRU. How quickly can you do it?"

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“If everyone moves to the edge of the chamber, it should only take ten to fifteen minutes.”

“Lower me to the beach, XRU. I’ll explain to Matilda what we must do, and as soon as the lead rope can pass through the laser-cut, I will return to SR3 and start lifting our load of frozen serpents.”

Once back on the rocky beach, he asked Matilda and the remaining Aqumites to retreat to the very edge of the volcano’s walls. The witches renewed their efforts to contain the serpents in the ice block while Lord Oron continued blasting cold air down the volcano’s spout.

Coran and Celina dragged Annison to the back wall of the craters void, their teeth chattering with cold as they shivered violently. They did their best to shield Annison from the worst of the chilling blast, but the cold was helping to preserve the little life left in her limbs.

It was heart-wrenching for Jimmy, but he had to concentrate his efforts on ridding Earth of the serpents. who

breathed fire. Hopefully, the net had caught all the creatures. It would be devastating if even one escaped the trap.

Jimmy issued the order for SR3 to begin lifting the heavy load of ice and serpents. SR3 had plenty of power, and even more in reserve, as the lead line to the net started to tighten around the reptiles. Jimmy kept freeing the line to stop it from snagging on the rocks and in the slit that the laser had cut into the side of the volcano. Inch by inch, the lead line straightened until it became taught between the weight in the net and SR3. "Hold position, XRU," Jimmy shouted.

"There's plenty of power, Commander."

"I know, but there is a danger the lead line could snap under the load. The whole of the lake is now frozen, and we are lifting it in a single piece."

"Understood, Commander." Hauling the load ceased while Jimmy considered his options.

"Do we have any drones on board fitted with lasers, XRU?"

"We have four small units charged and ready to go."



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“Deploy them immediately. Direct them to use their lasers to cut out the circle of ice that holds the serpents.”

“On their way.”

The drones circled the netted serpents, and their lasers started to cut out the block of ice that held the trapped creatures.

“Our strength is failing,” Came the warning from Matilda. “How much longer, Jimmy?”

“Just one more moment, Matilda,” cried Jimmy just as the conical block of ice holding the spiders’ web net broke free from the surface of the lake.

“That’s it, Matilda. I must get back into SR3 to carry the load into deep space. Please do what you can to help Annison. She’s in poor shape. Haul me back, XRU.”

When he was seated in the Commander’s chair, Jimmy guided SR3 as it rose smoothly through the atmosphere. He could not risk jerking the spider’s woven long line and very slowly increased SR3’s power as they rose through the sky.

As soon as they reached the edge of the ionosphere where gravity was almost non-existent, Jimmy increased SR3's speed, pulling a now almost weightless net full of serpents.

Jimmy was piloting towards Proxima Centauri, the star closest to Earth's sun, only ninety-three million miles away. Now that the load SR3 was pulling was weightless, he judged it safe to employ the hyperdrive built into SR3's engines. Jimmy had programmed XRU to locate a giant planet on the route around which he could leave the serpents to orbit in the freezing conditions of deep space. Proxima Centauri was a weak star, and it did not emit enormous amounts of heat, as our star, the Sun, does.

XRU had spotted an unnamed giant planet circled by several rings, somewhat like Saturn, less than halfway to Proxima Centauri. Jimmy put his starship into orbit around the unknown world and uncoupled the ice ball from SR3 by cutting the lead line with a laser shot.

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Duty fulfilled, Jimmy instructed XRU to take over and return to the extinct volcano's cone, where his newfound love lay injured and close to death.

## Chapter 15

Jimmy's heart was in his mouth as he entered the cavern where Annison lay, seriously injured. Her body was surrounded by the most powerful of Earth's witches, led by Matilda. Lord Oron, too had refused to leave the scene, just in case, there was the slightest chance of being able to do anything at all to ease Annison's condition.

In Jimmy's absence, Elwinn had brought Annison's father, Milton, and Vanata, to the scene. They knelt on either side of the prostrate Annison.

"How is she doing?" Jimmy asked Milton.

The tears that flowed down Milton's cheeks told the story. It was Vanata who answered. "She is slowly slipping further and further away from us, Jimmy. Matilda thinks she has lost too much flesh and blood to recover."

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Jimmy could not hold in his feelings anymore, and he burst into tears. Lord Oron, the ancient Weatherman, pulled Jimmy to his chest and allowed the young man to vent his painful feelings. “I’ve hardly got to know her, Lord Oron. Why should I lose her when all her friends have escaped.”

“Jimmy,” quietly Lord Oron spoke into Jimmy’s shaking shoulders. “It is not just your loss. Look at the pain on the faces of Milton and Vanata. They too are losing the love of their heart’s.”.

Jimmy wiped the tears from his eyes and walked over to Milton and Vanata. He sank into the sand beside them and hugged both. Milton responded. “She is the light in my life, and we are losing her beauty which has still to reach its prime. She had so much more to offer.”

Jimmy stood and turned to Matilda. “Surely,” he said, “it is in your power to repair the damage done to Annison.”

Matilda answered with her head bowed to the ground. “Annison is so badly injured that all our powers combined cannot restore her, no matter how much we want to save her.”

"I cannot believe that the mighty guardians of earth cannot save a single Aquamite who has helped rid the planet of fire breathing, flesh-eating serpents."

"Jimmy. Jimmy." Matilda pleaded. "Understand that much as we want to help, some magic is beyond our powers."

Jimmy turned again to his friend, Lord Oron. "And is your power useless to help when a dear friend needs us?"

Lord Oron's temper was let loose, and the skies shook with the thunder of his rage. Shafts of lightning lit the darkness inside the volcano's caldera lake.

"You may be a friend, young man, but that does not entitle you to belittle the power of the Weather Lord."

Thunder continued to rumble its bass tones, and Lord Oron stood tall and extended his arms skywards. "Lord Oron," cried Matilda. "Don't unleash the storm. It will destroy us all."

Elwinn, Floella and Ira joined Matilda, and their pleading was heard. Jade could only stand rooted to the spot by the sheer power Lord Oron had unleashed. She raised her voice,

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“Lord Oron, please come back. We need your help. Banish this monster which is not you.”

And Lord Oron heard Jade’s voice above the roaring of the storm and quelled the anger that had ignited the storm. “Calm has returned, little one. No one will be hurt.”

Lord Oron returned to his former calm self and approached Head Witch Matilda. “I apologise for my outburst, Matilda. For a moment, I was transported back through the centuries to a time when I ruled one-twelfth of the universe. My pride was wounded, but that is no excuse.”

“Lord Oron, I am so sorry,” said a sad Jimmy. “I was so concerned about Annison that I forgot my manners.”

“It’s over now, Jimmy. No need to dwell on it.” He dismissed Jimmy’s concerns and turned to the Chief Witch.

“Matilda, Jimmy has resurrected a hidden memory that may have the power to save Annison and the other injured Aquamites.

“Before the witches appeared on Earth, it was ruled by Universal Lords, of which I was but one. One Master governed

twelve Lords,” Lord Oron explained. “The Master and the Lords still exist, but they have had no cause to intervene since the witches took control.

“The power they hold far exceeds that of witches.”

“Then, why are you subservient to Matilda’s circle,” Jimmy asked.

“That is because I am many more centuries older than they are, Jimmy. My powers have halved with the passing of the years. But the power of the Master exceeds anything you have ever experienced. If I can make supplication to the Master, he may be of a mind to assist us in our plight.

Matilda addressed Lord Oron. “I knew the Lords still existed, but I had no idea that the Master could or would intervene in Earthly matters.”

“He only intervenes if he believes that the cause warrants his interference, Matilda.”

Jimmy could hardly contain his rising enthusiasm. There seemed to be a possible glimmer of hope that could



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save Annison. “Lord Oron, will you contact the Master to ask for his help to save the Aquamites?”

“What do you say, Matilda?”

“Lord Oron, you do not need my permission but thank you for the courtesy of asking.”

“Please, Lord Oron,” Jimmy pleaded. “Please let us at least ask for the Master’s help.”

There was but the slightest pause. “Of course, I will, Jimmy. But there is no ‘we’. Only I of Earth’s guardians can journey to the seat of the Master. There is only one route, known only to the Lords, and only the Weather Cloud knows the way. Only a Lord can make the journey. Sorry, Jimmy. But you will have to wait with the others until I return.”

“It is your decision, Lord Oron,” Matilda. said. “We know you will make every effort. Plead on our behalf for the Master to intervene and save the Aquamites. Return to us soon, safely.”

Lord Oron stooped through the arched entrance to the world outside the volcano. He stepped out onto the sand

where he had left the Weather Cloud tethered. He did not pause or say goodbye to his friends. He was apprehensive about meeting the Master. He recovered the mooring line and stepped into the Cloud's control cabin. He issued but a single command. "Home," he said to the Cloud.

The Cloud rose into the sky, vertically, at speed. It ascended and accelerated, of its own volition, until the Cloud was but a blur in the skyscape, indistinguishable from all other clouds in the sky. When the Cloud reached a predetermined speed, it broke through the invisible barrier into the world of the Lords of the known universe.

Lord Oron stepped out of his Cloud into a vast chamber occupied by eleven other Lords. Their table was round so that there was no prominent head of proceedings. All twelve Lords bowed to the Master, who sat in a chair identical to the others. "Welcome back, Lord Oron," greeted the Master. "Your presence has been missed. We are pleased to have you in our circle again."

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The chamber echoed 'Here, Here,' as each Lord welcomed Lord Oron in turn.

"Master, my powers have been in decline for many years. I was afraid to show my weakness to the circle."

"Lord Oron, you have misjudged your colleagues. We have never had cause for concern regarding your capabilities.

"Once we were Gods who ruled overall, but age affects everything, even us. When you recognised an approaching weakness, you took steps to appoint a very capable assistant. Your tiredness has never imperilled the world, not since you found the help of a pixie to watch over the weather during your brief naps.

"But what emergency brings you back to us?"

"Master, and fellow Lords, I live among the mortals who live on Earth. Some made their homes in the skies. I know them as Sky Islanders. Others made their homes beneath Earth's surface. They are known as Diamites. A few others, the Aquamites, live in the ocean and swim and breathe as well as any fish. A fire breathing sea serpent invaded their world.

The magic of the witches was powerless against the creatures.

“They called for the assistance of a boy from the star world of Attalia to help to remove the menace.”

“We have come across this Attalian young man several times,” the Master related. “Jimmy McGellan is a young force for good wherever he turns up in the universe.

“And surely he succeeded in removing the danger?”

“He worked with Matilda, the leader of Earth’s guardian witches, and he managed to banish the serpents in a block of ice and locked it into an orbit around a distant giant planet. The serpents will be locked in that orbit for millions of years.”

“So, his plan was a success, Lord Oron?”

“Yes, Master, but there was a terrible price to pay. The serpents’ fiery breath severely burned three young Aquamites. And one of them was wounded, mortally.

“She has lost so much blood neither the guardian witches nor I can save her. Jimmy could try to get her to his home planet, where they have very advanced medical

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processes, but I doubt she would survive the journey. She is clinging on to life by the narrowest thread just because I cooled down the area where she lies.”

The Master answered, his voice apologetic and low.

“Lord Oron, what you ask for. is a process that we have not performed for many centuries. We are not the arbiters of life and death.”

“Master, Annison still lives and breathes. I do not ask that she be brought back to life. She is still alive. And Jimmy McGellan’s heart has been won by this beautiful Aquamite. There are so few Aquamites remaining that the clan cannot afford the loss of three of their kind. Since the attacks began, the serpents have taken more than eight.”

“I hear your plea, Lord Oron. I believe you have justification for this request. How do the rest of the Lord’s think?”

They raised their glasses of mead in unison, drained them of their contents and flung the empty glasses into the

enormous fireplace. The flames of the fire sputtered and sparkled before turning green.

“Request granted,” said the Master.

Lord Oron bowed low to his fellow Lords. “My thanks, dear friends, for your support. Your healing will save much more than just three Aquamites.”

“Take this horn of nectar, Lord Oron. Give each a drop or two, and the power of the Masters will restore them.”

“Eternal thanks,” Master.

“Be on your way. Lord Oron. It would be best if you got your friends to drink it while they still breathe. And do not forget to come back to us soon to let us know how Earthly matters move.

”Now go!”

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## Chapter 16

The cloud returned Lord Oron to the extinct volcano, and he knelt in the sand by Annison's side. She was held upright by Milton and Vanata. He raised the horn to her lips and dispensed a few drops of nectar between her lips.

Jimmy took the horn and gave a drop of nectar to Santana, Coran and Celina. Their healing was almost instantaneous, but Annison still lay quietly in her father's arms.

"Give Annison more nectar," Milton suggested.

"Let's give her one more moment," Lord Oron suggested. "I have followed the Master's instructions to the letter. See, the colour is returning to her cheeks."

Even as he spoke, Annison's eyelids flickered slightly. Her fingers twitched in Vanata's hand, and Vanata almost

shouted out in her delight. "Milton, she's coming back to us. I can feel her stirring" She pulled Milton down to the sand and flung her arms around his neck. "You've saved her, Lord Oron. Thank you," she cried. Milton looked to Lord Oron. "Fron the bottom of our hearts, thank you, Lord Oron."

"The magic is not mine," he responded. "It has come from the most powerful force living in our universe."

Jimmy gasped his appreciation of what the Weatherman had accomplished. "But you have sought it out and brought it to us. Thank you, Lord Oron."

"I'll be sure to pass your thanks back to where they belong, Jimmy."

"I would love to thank the Lords personally," Jimmy said.

"That will never happen, Jimmy. You have come closer to them through me than any other. Much as I value your friendship, there is no way the Master would dream of meeting a mortal. Be satisfied that he acted on your behalf to save this beautiful young Aquamite who is staring at you this very moment."



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Jimmy spun around so quickly he almost fell over in his haste to reach Annison. His shyness disappeared, and he held Annison in his arms. Tears streamed down the cheeks of both youngsters. Relief and happiness spread throughout those gathered by the edge of the volcano's lake. Even the guardian witches shed tears of joy. The Masters had intervened and sent their magic powers to repair the injuries the Aquamites had taken. The brave young Aquamites drank the nectar administered by Lord Oron and were healed.

The serpents were gone, but it would be a while before anyone was brave enough to venture within striking distance of the volcanic vents where the creatures had made their homes. The vents would have to be checked for any signs of life but not just yet. They needed a period of recovery. They needed time to re-establish their peaceful, carefree society.

Jimmy knew that there would be no peace until someone checked out that no serpents remained in the depths of the Emerald Lake. The Aquamites had been severely discouraged from attempting to face such monsters again. They had seen

the terrible punishment that awaited anyone who chanced their luck against the serpents.

“I need your help, Elwinn. I cannot hold my breath for such a long dive.”

“I will be with you all the way, Jimmy,” Elwinn said. “I am proud to be one of your many friends.”

“Thanks, Elwinn. I am already deeply indebted for your help on so many occasions.”

“You owe our circle no repayment, Jimmy. We have worked well together. Long may it continue.”

“I don’t plan on going anywhere any time soon, Jimmy said, casting a glance at Annison, whose health was improving minute by minute.

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