

The Adventures of Jimmy Crikey: Radioactive!

Wallace E Briggs

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my greatest supporter, Pat, my long-suffering wife whose encouragement picks me up every time I stumble.

Equally supportive is my first draft editor, Denise, my sister-in-law, whose diligence in correcting my errors is impeccable.

And, perhaps unusually, I dedicate this story to Florence Ellerby, who decided she wanted to be a mermaid. How often can we keep a promise to one so young and full of promise, even if it is a little later than expected?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My chosen editor for many years, Vanessa Curtis, always has a pertinent suggestion or ten or more, that helps to breathe life into my characters and greatly improves the story's flow.

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The Adventures of Jimmy Crikey: Radioactive!

Chapter 1

Jimmy lay beside Annison, enjoying the warmth of the sunshine and her companionship. The broad beam of sunlight illuminated the sandy shoreline. Side by side on the sandy shore, by the pool inside the extinct volcano's caldera, holding hands, the mood was tranquil. Such moments were far too infrequent for Jimmy's taste. Now in his early teens, getting together with a mermaid for any length of time was a minor miracle. They lived two very different lives.

Both lived on planet Earth, but Annison and her race of Aquamites were residents of Emerald Lake, which lay far below Roombelow, Jimmy's adopted hometown. But their differences were never a problem when they were in each other's company and conversation flowed freely.

Their relaxation was rudely interrupted by an enormous splash. "The walls of the volcano are collapsing," yelled Annison. "Get me into the water quickly." Jimmy lifted the mermaid and jumped directly into the pool with her in his arms. As soon as Annison hit the water, she swam down to the tunnel that led to Emerald Lake.

Enormous rocks fell from the volcano into the pool. The few fish that were having a leisurely swim took flight and sped through the entrance into the great ocean to seek safety. As far as Jimmy could see, none were injured, but he and Annison were quickly swimming down the tunnel leading to Emerald Lake. Jimmy paused for a moment and looked back.

The volcano's walls were crumbling and would soon fill the pool beneath the disappearing volcano's peak. Debris was raining down faster and faster, but Jimmy could do nothing. He turned and followed Annison, heading for Emerald Lake. His sapphire belt allowed him to breathe under the water, but he would have to wait until they reached the safety of Emerald Lake before they could talk about what was happening. Behind them, chaotic pressure waves travelled through the water and buffeted the friends from side to side, scraping flesh from Annison's elbows, shoulders and tail. Jimmy was protected largely by the one-piece, silver Attalian, indestructible suit he wore whenever he visited Annison. The shock waves lessened as they swam further into the tunnels that led to Emerald Lake.

There was a link between their two worlds. An underground river flowed from Emerald Lake to fill the well in the centre of Roombelow. That did not mean getting from one place to the other was easy.

The problem was that the river's tunnels were flooded to roof height. Jimmy could make the journey only because he had been gifted a magical belt from Witch Elwinn, the Guardian of Earth's watery realms.

There were four Witch Guardians of Earth's realms. Ira watched over the skies; Floella, the earth, sand rocks, pebbles and boulders; the fourth witch and leader of the coven had been Matilda for years and years until she was called to a higher realm and needed to appoint a successor. In terms of seniority, that should have been Elwinn. Contrary to all precedent, Matilda had appointed her recently qualified young pupil, Jade, as the new overall leader. There was no dispute, and Jade was now the leader of the witch's coven.

She had been selected at an early age, just before she entered her teenage years. Matilda had passed on all the knowledge she had accumulated over hundreds of years. That did not make Jade a perfect witch. She would always be prone to make mistakes when casting a spell. That was not so surprising because there were lots of spells to remember. There were so many that frequent searches of the ancient scrolls store were essential. Even then, Jade was still likely to make a mistake or two. However, she now lived in the house on the hill that overlooked the town of Roombelow, and despite her youth, she was Head of the Coven.

Jimmy and Annison had not been thinking of anything but themselves, luxuriating in the wide beam of sunshine that shone down on them through the extinct volcano's empty peak. This was the last pool with a beach before Emerald Lake joined the outside world's ocean. It also happened to be where Jimmy had captured the Wormz that threatened all life on Earth.

The Wormz had taken several Aquamite lives during their short reign of terror. Annison would have ended up as one of their victims had Jimmy not transported her to his home planet of Attalia in his Starship. President Alpha had instructed the most technologically skilled physicians to save Annison after one of the Worms had bitten a chunk out of her fish-like tail. But even their skills were not enough to save her. It had taken an extraordinary intervention by the mysterious Master to heal her wound and restore her life.

When they were together, Jimmy only had eyes for her beautiful, light blue eyes and long intertwined emerald green and golden locks. There were limitations to their companionship

because Annison always needed to keep the fluorescent green scales of her tail and skin moist, and, of course, she had no legs, so she needed to be carried over dry land. Jimmy did not find that imposition. He loved being with the Aquamite. They were never short of conversation, discovering more about Jimmy's extraordinary life. She was never bored listening to his account of his many adventures since he was orphaned and left in the care of 'Aunt' Ethel in Esh Village on the upper Earth.

Jimmy led the way back to the safety of Emerald Lake but Annison stopped and turned around to witness the continuous rain of rocks and rubble falling into the tunnel that led to the open sea. Her eyes were wide with fear. Jimmy pulled her close in a hug and felt her heart beating wildly. He pointed towards Emerald Lake, and Annison nodded in agreement. She broke free from his arms, and while Jimmy began swimming to the lake, she could not resist looking back at the destruction that would cut off access to the ocean for the Aquamites.

Ahead, Jimmy beckoned her furiously. At that moment, the tunnel roof collapsed. Annison did not escape and was crushed under the falling wall of rocks. Horrified, Jimmy lost sight of the Aquamite. His closest friend in all the universe needed his help, but he was powerless to save her. He furiously attempted to remove the boulders that buried Annison. His fingers could not find traction on the boulders. Not only were the rocks slippery wet but they were too heavy for him to move. In despair he applied all his strength, straining every muscle in his body. But nothing moved. Then, at last, his mind began to work again, and he used the power of his sapphire belt to communicate with Witch Elwinn.

"Elwinn," he transmitted his thought message, "Annison has been trapped in rock fall just as we left the extinct volcano, returning to Emerald Lake. I cannot move the rocks."

"I'm on my way, Jimmy," she responded. "I'll only be a minute or two. Try to take some of the rocks off her. Reduce the weight that is crushing her."

"Elwinn, the rocks are too heavy for me to move."

"See if you can get some help from the Aquamites. I'll not be long."

Jimmy turned to swim towards Emerald Lake, but as he turned, he was met by a crowd of Aquamites, led by Milton and his companion, Vanaata, swimming towards him. They were trying to find the source of all the commotion. There was some silent communication between the Aquamites. They knew immediately that Annison was in trouble. They didn't need Jimmy to tell them where she was trapped. They sensed her location and started working together to remove the fallen rocks.

Santana and Coran were two of the strongest young male Aquamites, and side by side, they removed several boulders pressing down on the spot where Annison lay.

Jimmy could tell they could see Annison through a gap between boulders. They reported that she was safe but under tremendous pressure because the rocks that trapped her pressed around her body. At that moment, Elwinn arrived. Her blue gown floated around her body, almost wrapping her in invisibility as she melded into the water-filled tunnel.

Santana broke away from shifting rocks to report that the boulders trapping Annison were too heavy to lift, even with help from Coran. Elwinn could understand every thought that came her way, and so could Jimmy now that she was near. Elwinn intervened and attempted to roll the boulder away using a strong water current. The boulder did not move a millimeter. "I'll call for help from Floella. Perhaps the guardian of Earth's land and mountains can move the boulder."

Elwinn closed her eyes and concentrated on contacting her sister-witch. When she explained the problem, Floella replied she would come as fast as possible. Speaking to Jimmy and the other Aquamites who had gathered around, she explained that the witch who ruled Earth's realms of mountains, hills and meadows was on her way.

One young Aquamite, holding Vanaata's hand, broke away and headed for the gap between the boulders. Her gold and green hair streamed behind her, and Jimmy thought she looked every inch as beautiful as Annison. She plunged her arm into the gap between the rocks and sent her thought message, "I have hold of your hand, Annison. Don't be afraid. A new witch is on her way to help get you out."

"Florence, dear sister, I hear you. I am not afraid now that you are here."

Jimmy turned to Milton and asked, "Who is the small mermaid holding Annison's hand?"

It was Vanaata who answered. "They are both my children. Florence is the younger of the two and adores her big sister."

"Annison never mentioned that she had a sister," Jimmy said.

"I think." Milton said, "When Annison is with you, she forgets that the rest of the world exists."

Jimmy blushed at what sounded like a gentle reprimand from Annison's father.

The arrival of Floella avoided further embarrassment. All the witches had the power to borrow powers from the other witches, so she had no trouble breathing underwater. Floella took in the situation in an instant and exchanged thoughts with Elwinn. “I can see that blasting the rocks would be very dangerous with Annison stuck beneath them.” She sent the message out to everyone around who could hear thoughts. That included Jimmy because he wore Elwinn’s sapphire belt to share her powers. “Please, Floella, is there anything you can do? Annison is slowly being crushed by the boulders pressing down on her.”

Jimmy added, “I know you are the most powerful witch in the coven when it comes to matters involving the earth and its rocks.”

“That’s true. Elwinn and I plan to help release Annison from the prison she is trapped in. But first, let me get some additional help from Jade. If we combine our powers, we can save her.”

“I’m here, Floella,” came the words from Jade. “What do you need me for?”

“I’ll be with you in spirit,” Ira’s voice echoed through their minds. “But I can’t leave the Sky Islands immediately. Lady Cleoptra needs my help to restore an imbalance in San Moran. The whole island is rocking.”

“I need you, Elwinn and Jade to join forces with me only for a few minutes,” Floella said. “Follow me inside the rocks that are trapping Annison. Once there, we expand our minds until the rocks crumble to sand.”

“Brilliant idea, Floella,” praised Elwinn. “If we can shatter the rocks from inside, there will be no blast.”

“That’s the general idea,” Floella added. “But we must start at the top of the pile and work our way down. Ready?”

“First, let’s get Florence out of harm’s way,” Jimmy said. He waved Florence to return to her mother, and the witches went to work.

Three witches dematerialised to follow Floella’s spirit deep into the centre of the boulders. They occupied and filled every crack and the tiny voids in the large rock at the top of the rubble pressing down on Annison. Then, together, they expanded their presence until the inner particles of sand that made up the rock began to fall apart and fell to the floor of the tunnel in a steady, flowing stream of sand. Milton realised that Annison had been saved because two rocks on either side of her body provided a shield to protect her.

The last boulder disappeared, and Florence could wait no longer. She broke free of her mother's restraining hand and swam to help Annison escape her prison simultaneously with Jimmy. Annison was sandwiched once more between the two people she most loved in the world, and Florence did not object to sharing her sister with Jimmy.

The witches did not wait for congratulations or thanks. They got on with their lives and duties and quietly disappeared to continue protecting Earth's realms. Only Floella remained to ensure that everyone was safe. She dismissed the profusion of thanks Jimmy and the Aquamites poured on her.

"When the Earth has settled, Jimmy," Floella promised, "I'll return to clear the tunnel that leads to the Great Oceans. I know how important it is to the Aquamites. With no one around, I can blast the rocks apart without fear of hurting a bystander."

Jimmy released his hold of Annison so her parents could welcome her back into their arms.

"We're all safe now. Aren't we, Jimmy?" Florence asked, still holding Jimmy's hand. "I think so, Florence. No more rocks have fallen, and the tunnel walls are no longer shaking. It must have been an earthquake."

"We've had earthquakes before, but they were never that strong."

"I am only guessing but remember when the Scarab beetles were chewing up the rocks in Lithnia?"

"We are a long way from Lithnia, Jimmy."

"True, but they did a lot of damage to Roombelow. And that is even further away. Perhaps they tunneled through your world to get to Roombelow and weakened the structure around Emerald Lake."

Witch Jade joined the discussion. "Floella has reported that the Scarabs did widespread damage between all the worlds on Earth. She promises to restore all the damage just as soon as she can. Floella can bring all the cracks together and fuse them into one. It will take one mighty quake to dislodge her work."

"So, you see, Florence. You are under the protection of the witch's coven," Jimmy said. "They will always come to your aid in times of trouble."

Her father, Milton, expanded on Jimmy's reassurances. "That does not mean that you should not take care, dear daughter. Your safety is always something you should take responsibility for. We don't want to pull Earth's Guardians away from their vital roles of guarding the rest of the world."

"I don't think you need to worry about that, Milton," said Jimmy.

Floella decided she could do no more for the moment and took her leave from the Aquamites.

"It's also time for me to get going," Jimmy said. "I don't want Amanda and Mr McDonald to worry about me needlessly."

"It's been so nice meeting you for the first time, Florence. I'm sure we will get to be good friends, so please look after your sister until I can return to see you all."

Annison gave him a playful dig in the ribs and a quick self-conscious hug and waved goodbye to the rapidly receding sight of Jimmy swimming towards the well in Roombelow.

Chapter 2

On land, nothing could outrun Jimmy. One of the gifts of his heritage from his Attalian parents was the speed at which he could run. The downside was that he was born with enormous feet. Big feet were a significant disadvantage as he grew up because they attracted unwanted attention. He was constantly mocked and bullied. The wonderful thing was that his feet fit into the red Attalian boots as soon as he could walk, and when Jimmy wore his red boots, he was the fastest mover on Earth.

Even more importantly, Jimmy's feet never grew any more prominent. As he grew up, his feet became less noticeable. And, because he could move his feet so quickly, he could kick out at great speed and swim even faster than an Aquamite.

"And are the Aquamites safe now?" Mr McDonald asked after Jimmy had finished bringing his surrogate parents in Roombelow up to date with his latest adventure.

Jimmy was in the process of clearing away the dishes after enjoying Amanda's home-cooked dinner of stewed diced meat in a rich beef gravy enhanced with the addition of suet dumplings, crisp on top and soft underneath to soak up the extra gravy. "They are not in any immediate danger," Jimmy replied. "Floella still needs to do some work to stabilise the voids in the rocks that the Scarabs have left."

"The Scarabs also attacked Roombelow," Amanda said with a worried frown.

"Don't worry. There were no rock falls here during the earthquake that shook the lower world," Mr McDonald said, unbuttoning his tartan waistcoat so that his stomach could expand in comfort over his red trouser belt after indulging in Amanda's wonderful dinner. "And Witch Floella has promised to fill in all the tiny holes in the rocks so they will be as strong as ever they were. Right, Jimmy?"

"Once a witch gives her word, you can be sure it will happen."

"I feel better knowing that," Amanda said, as she served hot chocolate drinks and shortcake biscuits on a tray, while they sat around the log fire.

“Hmm! It does make you think, though.”

“What do you mean, Mr McDonald?” Amanda asked.

“It makes me wonder what other damage those dreaded beetles might have done. After all, no one knows exactly where they were digging. It was all out of sight, underground.”

Jimmy wiped the shortcake crumbs off his mouth and stood up to clear the crumbs that had spilt onto his knees. “I’m sure Witch Floella would know if they had seriously damaged the earth around Roombelow. And anyway, she said she would be filling in the little gaps in a just a short while.”

“You’re probably right, Jimmy.” Mr McDonald said. “But even if she is a powerful witch. She could not test every bit of the world above us. And it will be a tragedy if the cliffs around Roombelow begin to crumble.”

“Mr McDonald!” Amanda reprimanded her partner. “How can you think such thoughts? That would be the end of us all.”

“I don’t think it would wipe us out,” Jimmy suggested. “But it would be very alarming.

“It would be more than alarming,” Mr McDonald said.

“Please,” Amanda objected. “Let’s change the topic of conversation. We are not in danger; if anything were to go wrong, the Guardian Witches would rescue us. So, let that be the end of these awful thoughts.

“Tell me, Jimmy, how is Annison since the Master saved her life?”

“She is very well, Amanda. The scars have healed, and there is no trace of damage to the scales on her tail. All the scales are back to their usual fluorescent green, just like all the other female Aquamites. There are a few scrapes and bruises, but she swims as strongly as ever. And I met her younger sister today. Florence. She looks just like a smaller version of Annison. Every bit as pretty. She insisted on holding Annison’s hand while she was trapped, and stayed until the last moment, even when the witches started grinding the rocks into sand.”

“A brave girl, then,” Mr McDonald said.

“She was fearless. All she cared about was that her sister was in danger.”

“I look forward to the day when I can hug her,” Amanda cooed. “But I suppose that is impossible. I don’t have the power of the witches, who all seem able to breathe underwater. Unless Jimmy will loan me Elwinn’s sapphire belt.”

“That wouldn’t work Amanda. I can’t pass on the magic that goes with the belt. Only Elwinn can do that. But perhaps we can persuade her to help.”

“Don’t worry about that, Jimmy. I don’t have any suitable clothing to go swimming. I can’t swim.”

“That wouldn’t matter,” Jimmy said. “Once you can breathe underwater, it’s just like going for a walk.”

“Don’t go filling her head with strange notions, Jimmy. Before you know it, she’ll ask to join you on a trip to Attalia in your Starship.”

“Mr McDonald! Behave yourself! As if I would leave you to visit those strange, far away places. My place is by your side, where I am safe. Who would look after me if you weren’t around?”

“I may not always be the Mayor of Roombelow, but I could never face the world without you, dear.”

“Mr Mayor or not, you will always be my Mr McDonald.”

“I think perhaps I should have an early night,” Jimmy said, a little embarrassed at this unusual display of affection between his Roombelow carers. “You’ll do no such thing, young man. After you’ve washed the dishes, I’ve got the cards ready for a game of Whist. Mr McDonald will dry and put the dishes away while I finish my hot chocolate in peace with no more talk about impending catastrophes.”

That brought an end to further discussion about the eventful day Jimmy had just had. Amanda was good at doing that, keeping everyone on the path of normality. Neither she nor Mr McDonald were fans of excess excitement. Their lives were happiest when life did not throw up the unexpected. But then, sharing their hometown with the witch who had been the most powerful witch on Earth for years and years had to lead to the occasional upheaval.

It was not as though they were friends with Matilda, but they did respect her power. After all, Matilda had been the leader of the Witch Guardians of Earth’s realms for many lifetimes until she was called to serve in a higher realm. Everyone in Roombelow was surprised

when she appointed her recently qualified and youngest witch to become her successor. Jade now lived in what had been Matilda's home, the house on the hill that overlooked the town, where she also cared for the jet-black cat named Beatrix.

The playing cards were well-worn from their regular card games, keeping them entertained for many nights. The baize on the card table was bare in places where players rested their hands, scanning the hand of cards the dealer had distributed to them. Usually, Whist was a game for four players, but there were only three in Mr McDonald's household, so they played with one hand of cards out of play.

"What's the next trump suit cards?" Mr McDonald asked, fanning the cards while ensuring no one else could see his hand of cards. "It's Clubs, Mr McDonald," Jimmy advised.

"Hm," Mr McDonald murmured. He thought he held the winning hand because he had all the top cards in the Clubs suite, except for the Jack of Clubs. Combined with several picture cards in the red suits, Hearts and Diamonds, he believed he must have an unbeatable hand.

It was Jimmy's turn to lead, and he played the first card, a strong lead, the King of Diamonds. Mr McDonald held the Queen of Diamonds, so he could not win with that card and threw in a low card. The Ace of Diamonds must have been in the out-of-play fourth hand because Amanda played a low four of Diamonds, and Jimmy won the first trick.

Mr McDonald was not worried. He was sure he could come back strongly. He was confident he had the upper hand in this game.

Amanda won the next hand with a Queen of Spades, and again, Mr McDonald could not win. But he was not worried. Malcolm McDonald knew he held a strong hand. He had no further Spades in his hand, so he could trump whenever one of the others played a Spade card. Mr McDonald felt superior, knowing he would win this round. In the next play, he used his lowest Club card, the Three, to trump every other card played. He had a great big smile on his face.

He leaned over the table to gather the 'trick' he had won. At the same instant, Jimmy suddenly jumped to his feet, knocked over the card table, holding his head.

"Stop shouting, Elwinn, you're hurting my head,"

Amanda and Mr McDonald sat staring at Jimmy's obvious distress. They could not understand what was going on.

“I’ll be there as soon as I can, Elwinn. Does Jade know?”

After a pause to receive the answer, Jimmy continued. “It will only take me a moment to change, and I’ll join you both on the shoreline at Emerald Lake.”

He turned to explain to Mr McDonald and Amanda. “Annison and Florence have been sucked into a hole in the floor of Emerald Lake, and goodness knows how many more of the Aquamites.”

“That’s awful,” Amanda said. “Of course, you must go immediately, Jimmy. We hope you can save them.”

“My Attalian suit will give me some protection if rocks are still falling from the ceiling.”

Whenever Jimmy went on an adventure, he preferred to wear his Attalian one-piece, silver costume because it was almost indestructible. That did not mean that Jimmy was invincible because his head and hands were still exposed, and his body could still be crushed. He pulled on his red Attalian boots, which endowed him with great speed, and lastly, he strapped Elwinn’s sapphire belt around his waist. Because of Elwinn’s magic belt, Jimmy could breathe underwater and communicate with all four witches in Jade’s Coven.

He leaned over the well’s low brick wall and grabbed the rope wrapped around the wooden roller to lower and raise the bucket up and down the well. Then he pulled on the rope to unwind it from around the roller and lowered the bucket until the rope was fully uncoiled and the bucket lay on the bed of the river that ran beneath Roombelow. Jimmy lowered himself to the bottom of the well using the rope.

The fact that Jimmy could stand only ankle-deep in the river at the bottom of the well was unusual because it should have been more than a metre deep.

Where had the water disappeared to?

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Chapter 1

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"See if you can get some help from the Aquamites. I'll not be long."

Jimmy turned to swim towards Emerald Lake, but as he turned, he was met by a crowd of Aquamites, led by Milton and his companion, Vanaata, swimming towards him. They were trying to find the source of all the commotion. There was some silent communication between the Aquamites. They knew immediately that Annison was in trouble. They didn't need Jimmy to tell them where she was trapped. They sensed her location and started working together to remove the fallen rocks.

Santana and Coran were two of the strongest young male Aquamites, and side by side, they removed several boulders pressing down on the spot where Annison lay.

Jimmy could tell they could see Annison through a gap between boulders. They reported that she was safe but under tremendous pressure because the rocks that trapped her pressed around her body. At that moment, Elwinn arrived. Her blue gown floated around her body, almost wrapping her in invisibility as she melded into the water-filled tunnel.

Santana broke away from shifting rocks to report that the boulders trapping Annison were too heavy to lift, even with help from Coran. Elwinn could understand every thought that came her way, and so could Jimmy now that she was near. Elwinn intervened and attempted to roll the boulder away using a strong water current. The boulder did not move a millimeter. "I'll call for help from Floella. Perhaps the guardian of Earth's land and mountains can move the boulder."

Elwinn closed her eyes and concentrated on contacting her sister-witch. When she explained the problem, Floella replied she would come as fast as possible. Speaking to Jimmy and the other Aquamites who had gathered around, she explained that the witch who ruled Earth's realms of mountains, hills and meadows was on her way.

One young Aquamite, holding Vanaata's hand, broke away and headed for the gap between the boulders. Her gold and green hair streamed behind her, and Jimmy thought she looked every inch as beautiful as Annison. She plunged her arm into the gap between the rocks and sent her thought message, "I have hold of your hand, Annison. Don't be afraid. A new witch is on her way to help get you out."

"Florence, dear sister, I hear you. I am not afraid now that you are here."

Jimmy turned to Milton and asked, "Who is the small mermaid holding Annison's hand?"

It was Vanaata who answered. "They are both my children. Florence is the younger of the two and adores her big sister."

"Annison never mentioned that she had a sister," Jimmy said.

"I think." Milton said, "When Annison is with you, she forgets that the rest of the world exists."

Jimmy blushed at what sounded like a gentle reprimand from Annison's father.

The arrival of Floella avoided further embarrassment. All the witches had the power to borrow powers from the other witches, so she had no trouble breathing underwater. Floella took in the situation in an instant and exchanged thoughts with Elwinn. “I can see that blasting the rocks would be very dangerous with Annison stuck beneath them.” She sent the message out to everyone around who could hear thoughts. That included Jimmy because he wore Elwinn’s sapphire belt to share her powers. “Please, Floella, is there anything you can do? Annison is slowly being crushed by the boulders pressing down on her.”

Jimmy added, “I know you are the most powerful witch in the coven when it comes to matters involving the earth and its rocks.”

“That’s true. Elwinn and I plan to help release Annison from the prison she is trapped in. But first, let me get some additional help from Jade. If we combine our powers, we can save her.”

“I’m here, Floella,” came the words from Jade. “What do you need me for?”

“I’ll be with you in spirit,” Ira’s voice echoed through their minds. “But I can’t leave the Sky Islands immediately. Lady Cleoptra needs my help to restore an imbalance in San Moran. The whole island is rocking.”

“I need you, Elwinn and Jade to join forces with me only for a few minutes,” Floella said. “Follow me inside the rocks that are trapping Annison. Once there, we expand our minds until the rocks crumble to sand.”

“Brilliant idea, Floella,” praised Elwinn. “If we can shatter the rocks from inside, there will be no blast.”

“That’s the general idea,” Floella added. “But we must start at the top of the pile and work our way down. Ready?”

“First, let’s get Florence out of harm’s way,” Jimmy said. He waved Florence to return to her mother, and the witches went to work.

Three witches dematerialised to follow Floella’s spirit deep into the centre of the boulders. They occupied and filled every crack and the tiny voids in the large rock at the top of the rubble pressing down on Annison. Then, together, they expanded their presence until the inner particles of sand that made up the rock began to fall apart and fell to the floor of the tunnel in a steady, flowing stream of sand. Milton realised that Annison had been saved because two rocks on either side of her body provided a shield to protect her.

The last boulder disappeared, and Florence could wait no longer. She broke free of her mother's restraining hand and swam to help Annison escape her prison simultaneously with Jimmy. Annison was sandwiched once more between the two people she most loved in the world, and Florence did not object to sharing her sister with Jimmy.

The witches did not wait for congratulations or thanks. They got on with their lives and duties and quietly disappeared to continue protecting Earth's realms. Only Floella remained to ensure that everyone was safe. She dismissed the profusion of thanks Jimmy and the Aquamites poured on her.

"When the Earth has settled, Jimmy," Floella promised, "I'll return to clear the tunnel that leads to the Great Oceans. I know how important it is to the Aquamites. With no one around, I can blast the rocks apart without fear of hurting a bystander."

Jimmy released his hold of Annison so her parents could welcome her back into their arms.

"We're all safe now. Aren't we, Jimmy?" Florence asked, still holding Jimmy's hand. "I think so, Florence. No more rocks have fallen, and the tunnel walls are no longer shaking. It must have been an earthquake."

"We've had earthquakes before, but they were never that strong."

"I am only guessing but remember when the Scarab beetles were chewing up the rocks in Lithnia?"

"We are a long way from Lithnia, Jimmy."

"True, but they did a lot of damage to Roombelow. And that is even further away. Perhaps they tunneled through your world to get to Roombelow and weakened the structure around Emerald Lake."

Witch Jade joined the discussion. "Floella has reported that the Scarabs did widespread damage between all the worlds on Earth. She promises to restore all the damage just as soon as she can. Floella can bring all the cracks together and fuse them into one. It will take one mighty quake to dislodge her work."

"So, you see, Florence. You are under the protection of the witch's coven," Jimmy said. "They will always come to your aid in times of trouble."

Her father, Milton, expanded on Jimmy's reassurances. "That does not mean that you should not take care, dear daughter. Your safety is always something you should take responsibility for. We don't want to pull Earth's Guardians away from their vital roles of guarding the rest of the world."

"I don't think you need to worry about that, Milton," said Jimmy.

Floella decided she could do no more for the moment and took her leave from the Aquamites.

"It's also time for me to get going," Jimmy said. "I don't want Amanda and Mr McDonald to worry about me needlessly."

"It's been so nice meeting you for the first time, Florence. I'm sure we will get to be good friends, so please look after your sister until I can return to see you all."

Annison gave him a playful dig in the ribs and a quick self-conscious hug and waved goodbye to the rapidly receding sight of Jimmy swimming towards the well in Roombelow.

Chapter 2

On land, nothing could outrun Jimmy. One of the gifts of his heritage from his Attalian parents was the speed at which he could run. The downside was that he was born with enormous feet. Big feet were a significant disadvantage as he grew up because they attracted unwanted attention. He was constantly mocked and bullied. The wonderful thing was that his feet fit into the red Attalian boots as soon as he could walk, and when Jimmy wore his red boots, he was the fastest mover on Earth.

Even more importantly, Jimmy's feet never grew any more prominent. As he grew up, his feet became less noticeable. And, because he could move his feet so quickly, he could kick out at great speed and swim even faster than an Aquamite.

"And are the Aquamites safe now?" Mr McDonald asked after Jimmy had finished bringing his surrogate parents in Roombelow up to date with his latest adventure.

Jimmy was in the process of clearing away the dishes after enjoying Amanda's home-cooked dinner of stewed diced meat in a rich beef gravy enhanced with the addition of suet dumplings, crisp on top and soft underneath to soak up the extra gravy. "They are not in any immediate danger," Jimmy replied. "Floella still needs to do some work to stabilise the voids in the rocks that the Scarabs have left."

"The Scarabs also attacked Roombelow," Amanda said with a worried frown.

"Don't worry. There were no rock falls here during the earthquake that shook the lower world," Mr McDonald said, unbuttoning his tartan waistcoat so that his stomach could expand in comfort over his red trouser belt after indulging in Amanda's wonderful dinner. "And Witch Floella has promised to fill in all the tiny holes in the rocks so they will be as strong as ever they were. Right, Jimmy?"

"Once a witch gives her word, you can be sure it will happen."

"I feel better knowing that," Amanda said, as she served hot chocolate drinks and shortcake biscuits on a tray, while they sat around the log fire.

“Hmm! It does make you think, though.”

“What do you mean, Mr McDonald?” Amanda asked.

“It makes me wonder what other damage those dreaded beetles might have done. After all, no one knows exactly where they were digging. It was all out of sight, underground.”

Jimmy wiped the shortcake crumbs off his mouth and stood up to clear the crumbs that had spilt onto his knees. “I’m sure Witch Floella would know if they had seriously damaged the earth around Roombelow. And anyway, she said she would be filling in the little gaps in a just a short while.”

“You’re probably right, Jimmy.” Mr McDonald said. “But even if she is a powerful witch. She could not test every bit of the world above us. And it will be a tragedy if the cliffs around Roombelow begin to crumble.”

“Mr McDonald!” Amanda reprimanded her partner. “How can you think such thoughts? That would be the end of us all.”

“I don’t think it would wipe us out,” Jimmy suggested. “But it would be very alarming.

“It would be more than alarming,” Mr McDonald said.

“Please,” Amanda objected. “Let’s change the topic of conversation. We are not in danger; if anything were to go wrong, the Guardian Witches would rescue us. So, let that be the end of these awful thoughts.

“Tell me, Jimmy, how is Annison since the Master saved her life?”

“She is very well, Amanda. The scars have healed, and there is no trace of damage to the scales on her tail. All the scales are back to their usual fluorescent green, just like all the other female Aquamites. There are a few scrapes and bruises, but she swims as strongly as ever. And I met her younger sister today. Florence. She looks just like a smaller version of Annison. Every bit as pretty. She insisted on holding Annison’s hand while she was trapped, and stayed until the last moment, even when the witches started grinding the rocks into sand.”

“A brave girl, then,” Mr McDonald said.

“She was fearless. All she cared about was that her sister was in danger.”

“I look forward to the day when I can hug her,” Amanda cooed. “But I suppose that is impossible. I don’t have the power of the witches, who all seem able to breathe underwater. Unless Jimmy will loan me Elwinn’s sapphire belt.”

“That wouldn’t work Amanda. I can’t pass on the magic that goes with the belt. Only Elwinn can do that. But perhaps we can persuade her to help.”

“Don’t worry about that, Jimmy. I don’t have any suitable clothing to go swimming. I can’t swim.”

“That wouldn’t matter,” Jimmy said. “Once you can breathe underwater, it’s just like going for a walk.”

“Don’t go filling her head with strange notions, Jimmy. Before you know it, she’ll ask to join you on a trip to Attalia in your Starship.”

“Mr McDonald! Behave yourself! As if I would leave you to visit those strange, far away places. My place is by your side, where I am safe. Who would look after me if you weren’t around?”

“I may not always be the Mayor of Roombelow, but I could never face the world without you, dear.”

“Mr Mayor or not, you will always be my Mr McDonald.”

“I think perhaps I should have an early night,” Jimmy said, a little embarrassed at this unusual display of affection between his Roombelow carers. “You’ll do no such thing, young man. After you’ve washed the dishes, I’ve got the cards ready for a game of Whist. Mr McDonald will dry and put the dishes away while I finish my hot chocolate in peace with no more talk about impending catastrophes.”

That brought an end to further discussion about the eventful day Jimmy had just had. Amanda was good at doing that, keeping everyone on the path of normality. Neither she nor Mr McDonald were fans of excess excitement. Their lives were happiest when life did not throw up the unexpected. But then, sharing their hometown with the witch who had been the most powerful witch on Earth for years and years had to lead to the occasional upheaval.

It was not as though they were friends with Matilda, but they did respect her power. After all, Matilda had been the leader of the Witch Guardians of Earth’s realms for many lifetimes until she was called to serve in a higher realm. Everyone in Roombelow was surprised

when she appointed her recently qualified and youngest witch to become her successor. Jade now lived in what had been Matilda's home, the house on the hill that overlooked the town, where she also cared for the jet-black cat named Beatrix.

The playing cards were well-worn from their regular card games, keeping them entertained for many nights. The baize on the card table was bare in places where players rested their hands, scanning the hand of cards the dealer had distributed to them. Usually, Whist was a game for four players, but there were only three in Mr McDonald's household, so they played with one hand of cards out of play.

"What's the next trump suit cards?" Mr McDonald asked, fanning the cards while ensuring no one else could see his hand of cards. "It's Clubs, Mr McDonald," Jimmy advised.

"Hm," Mr McDonald murmured. He thought he held the winning hand because he had all the top cards in the Clubs suite, except for the Jack of Clubs. Combined with several picture cards in the red suits, Hearts and Diamonds, he believed he must have an unbeatable hand.

It was Jimmy's turn to lead, and he played the first card, a strong lead, the King of Diamonds. Mr McDonald held the Queen of Diamonds, so he could not win with that card and threw in a low card. The Ace of Diamonds must have been in the out-of-play fourth hand because Amanda played a low four of Diamonds, and Jimmy won the first trick.

Mr McDonald was not worried. He was sure he could come back strongly. He was confident he had the upper hand in this game.

Amanda won the next hand with a Queen of Spades, and again, Mr McDonald could not win. But he was not worried. Malcolm McDonald knew he held a strong hand. He had no further Spades in his hand, so he could trump whenever one of the others played a Spade card. Mr McDonald felt superior, knowing he would win this round. In the next play, he used his lowest Club card, the Three, to trump every other card played. He had a great big smile on his face.

He leaned over the table to gather the 'trick' he had won. At the same instant, Jimmy suddenly jumped to his feet, knocked over the card table, holding his head.

"Stop shouting, Elwinn, you're hurting my head,"

Amanda and Mr McDonald sat staring at Jimmy's obvious distress. They could not understand what was going on.

“I’ll be there as soon as I can, Elwinn. Does Jade know?”

After a pause to receive the answer, Jimmy continued. “It will only take me a moment to change, and I’ll join you both on the shoreline at Emerald Lake.”

He turned to explain to Mr McDonald and Amanda. “Annison and Florence have been sucked into a hole in the floor of Emerald Lake, and goodness knows how many more of the Aquamites.”

“That’s awful,” Amanda said. “Of course, you must go immediately, Jimmy. We hope you can save them.”

“My Attalian suit will give me some protection if rocks are still falling from the ceiling.”

Whenever Jimmy went on an adventure, he preferred to wear his Attalian one-piece, silver costume because it was almost indestructible. That did not mean that Jimmy was invincible because his head and hands were still exposed, and his body could still be crushed. He pulled on his red Attalian boots, which endowed him with great speed, and lastly, he strapped Elwinn’s sapphire belt around his waist. Because of Elwinn’s magic belt, Jimmy could breathe underwater and communicate with all four witches in Jade’s Coven.

He leaned over the well’s low brick wall and grabbed the rope wrapped around the wooden roller to lower and raise the bucket up and down the well. Then he pulled on the rope to unwind it from around the roller and lowered the bucket until the rope was fully uncoiled and the bucket lay on the bed of the river that ran beneath Roombelow. Jimmy lowered himself to the bottom of the well using the rope.

The fact that Jimmy could stand only ankle-deep in the river at the bottom of the well was unusual because it should have been more than a metre deep.

Where had the water disappeared to?