

The Amazing Adventures of Jimmy Crikey

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Chapter 1

RUNNING AWAY

Jimmy Crikey was not a happy boy. His big blue eyes were so sad. None of the children at Hill Crest Junior School would play with Jimmy. They only ever made fun of him. He tried ever so hard to study during lessons but the other children's sly giggles and rude remarks always managed to make him feel uncomfortable. When the school bell rang for playtime and everyone dashed outside to continue their games of tug, tag, hopscotch or skip, there always remained one lonely figure in some quiet corner of the schoolyard. Jimmy had long since given up his attempts to join in their games. He just didn't seem to be able to fit in and it's not nice to always be laughed at.

Why did they laugh at Jimmy? Well, he was certainly quite different from the other children and he did have rather an odd appearance. His head was crowned with a bright red shock of unruly hair. Between his big blue eyes snuggled a small, snub nose. His ears were rather longer and more pointed than usual, but his feet, well they were simply ee-normous! They certainly looked out of place on such a small boy. Whenever he met someone for the first time they would stop and stare and then say, 'Crikey! Just look at him.' That was how he came to be known as Jimmy Crikey. His

real name was Jimmy McGellan but the boys and girls at Hill Crest school always called him Jimmy Crikey.

It started that one boy began to bully Jimmy, always making fun of his odd appearance. That boy persuaded one of his friends to join in the fun of taunting the odd one out and soon they were all ganging up on Jimmy. In team games, no one would choose Jimmy to be on their side because he had a habit of stumbling over his enormous feet. Whichever team he was on always lost the game.

As a result, no one chose Jimmy to be their friend. He was totally excluded from their playgroups and gangs, just because he was different. Despite their cruel jokes, Jimmy was a very bright boy. He seemed to learn faster than anyone else, but he never raised his hand during class to answer a teacher's question, although he almost always knew the answer. He just wanted to stay quietly in the background without drawing any further attention to himself.

Only when school was over for the day did Jimmy begin to relax and smile. Then he dashed back to his home on the very edge of Esher Village, where he lived with his very special Aunt Ethel. Lemonade and cake, or milk and biscuits, were always ready on the kitchen table when he rushed in from school to Aunt Ethel's warm welcome of a smile, a hug and a great big kiss.

Aunt Ethel Harper was kind, a little overweight, slightly rotund, but in a cuddly, warm way. She almost always wore a gingham pinafore over her flowery dresses. Her hair was as white as snow and she had looked after Jimmy for as long as he could remember. Jimmy's parents had died when he was very young and Aunt Ethel promised them she would look after their baby until he was old enough to care for

himself. Each night Aunt Ethel would tuck him up in bed and tell exciting, bedtime adventure stories. Some were about faraway places among the stars; others were about exploring strange worlds, and yet more were about sailing expeditions on distant seas. Then, after saying prayers, she would plant a kiss on his cheek and bid him, "Sleep tight!"

One night, after saying his prayers, as usual, Jimmy finally made up his mind. He was tired of everyone making fun of his strange appearance. It seemed to him that he just could not make any friends. No one had time to spare for the boy who was different. So, he wrote a note for Aunt Ethel and left it on his pillow. He had decided to run away.

"Please don't worry about me Aunt Ethel," he wrote. "I'm going off on a search to see if I can find a place where people will not laugh and make fun of me. Somehow, I feel that I don't belong in this world. I just don't fit in. Thank you for caring for me. When I am settled, I'll write to let you know where I am. Goodbye. Love from Jimmy."

He crept quietly down the stairs to the kitchen and packed into his satchel a few shortbread biscuits, two chocolate covered crisp bars and a bottle of lemonade. Carefully and quietly, he opened the kitchen door and walked out into the darkness of the night. With a last look over his shoulder, he set off on his journey into the wide world.

He turned left after leaving the house and began walking away from the village. Initially hesitant, until his eyes adjusted to the darkness of the night, he walked down the country lane, lit only by a silvery, full moon. And Jimmy started to wish he had waited until morning. He could hear the animals and owls making their night-time

noises, calling to each other, the owl telling the fox, "Look out! Someone's about!" By the time Jimmy reached the edge of the forest, the lane had narrowed to a pathway and the moon was hiding behind a cloud. He stumbled along the narrow track between the trees, whistling a happy tune to try to keep the fear at bay.

The noises of the night grew louder as if they were following him, so he walked a little faster. Then, like a pistol shot, there came the sharp sound of cracking wood and, without waiting to discover what it was, Jimmy ran. He didn't know that the sound had been created by an old, rotted branch which snapped and fell to the ground from a nearby tree. He just ran, and ran, and ran, bumping into tree trunks and tripping over long tree roots in his mad dash to escape. He was so blinded by fear that he didn't notice the hole in the ground opening up in front of him and suddenly he was falling, down and down and down.

He tumbled head over heels and bumped from side to side, in the shaft. His fall was slowed by the tangle of tree roots that grew across the vertical shaft, but he still landed with a painful bump when he came to a sudden stop on the dried leaves and twigs, which had collected at the bottom of the hole.

It should have been pitch black down there, but from one corner of the hole there came the faintest glow of light. He moved the twigs and dried leaves to one side, looked out and rubbed his eyes in amazement. He couldn't believe his eyes.

Outside of the dark hole, there was a whole new world. Jimmy emerged into green fields swathed in wildflowers stretching away for miles. The gently sloping hills were carpeted with colours of every hue and, in the distance, there were mountains topped with glistening snow. The entry to this world was at the base of a towering

cliffside. The tops of the cliffs were shrouded in mist where they met the sky. From the strangely luminous sky, a warm, shining glow of soft light bathed the whole scene.

Jimmy was astonished and, as he looked around, his wide eyes picked out traces of a faint pathway that only animals had trod. It led off into the distant green hills. He tossed his satchel over his shoulder and made up his mind to follow wherever the path led. Fear disappeared as Jimmy set off to explore this strange new world he had found at the bottom of a hole.

Chapter 2

UNDERGROUND WORLD

Jimmy followed the trampled grass track through the underground world for many hours. The path led through meadows, over surrounding hills, crossing many streams. Black and yellow, fuzzy-coated bees buzzed and colourful butterflies flitted among the flowers that were scattered in random patterns across the slopes.

After several hours of walking, tired, he stopped to rest awhile and sat on a rock at the top of a hill. All that exercise had made Jimmy feel quite hungry and thirsty. So, while he rested he ate the biscuits and one of the cakes that were packed in his satchel. He finished his picnic snack with a long thirst-quenching drink of lemonade.

Feeling refreshed, Jimmy started to follow the track again, winding slowly down the hill into the valley. Then the path appeared to widen into a definite track and then a road which led towards what appeared to be a village or a town. Yes! There, in the distance, was - a small town. His pace quickened and he strode confidently down the path to the bottom of the hill, along the road towards the town. He hoped and wished that the children in this town would not laugh at his bright red shock of hair, his small snub nose, his pointed ears and his eenor-mous feet.

Jimmy's footsteps clattered on the cobblestones when he walked between the houses into the town's central market square. No one laughed at him. No one laughed because there was no one there to laugh. There was not a single person to be seen, anywhere. The market square was deserted except for a well standing in the centre, with a low, red brick wall built around it with a small, green-tiled canopy over the roller bar.

There was not a sound to be heard other than the sighing of the breeze.

Jimmy stretched up on his toes and peered through the windows of the shops and houses that surrounded the square.

There were certainly people there but they were all fast asleep. He said a quiet, "Hello!" to the butcher, who was slouched in a chair inside his shop doorway, but the butcher just went on sleeping, eyes closed tight beneath his yellow straw hat. He said, "Hello!" again, louder this time, but the butcher still didn't hear him. At last, Jimmy shouted at the top of his voice, "Hello! Can anyone hear me?"

Then, very faintly, there came a reply. "Help! Help!" It wasn't the butcher's voice, he hadn't moved, not even his moustache had twitched.

Jimmy could not tell where the voice had come from and he tried again. "Hello! Where are you?"

Again the faint voice answered. "I'm down here."

Jimmy could hardly believe it - the sound seemed to be coming from the well in the middle of the town square. He walked across to it, stood on tiptoe and peered over the low surrounding wall, down the dark green shaft. When his eyes became

accustomed to the dimness he saw a strange sight. There, at the bottom of the well, was a small lady - sitting in a small boat.

"Well, don't just stand there looking at me," yelled the lady.

"Get me out of here."

"How can I do that?" Jimmy asked.

"Lower the bucket on the end of the rope," the echoing voice shouted back.

Jimmy tried to turn the handle that was attached to the well's wooden roller to lower the bucket into the well, but the handle was jammed solid. He leaned over the wall and shouted down, "I can't turn the handle, it's stuck."

"Well! Give it a kick then," bellowed the little lady. So, Jimmy did just that. He kicked the handle as hard as he could.

The force of the kick freed the rusted roller. The bucket fell down the well, but the roller turned so fast that Jimmy couldn't catch hold of the spinning handle to slow it down. He heard the bucket bouncing madly, from side to side, against the walls of the well. Then there was a big bump, a loud splash and a surprised shout. "Aghhhh!"

Worried, he shouted down, "Are you all right?"

After a brief pause there came the rather cross answer, "No! I'm not all right. The bucket hit me on the head and knocked me into the water. Now there's a bump on my head and I'm all wet through." There was a short silence and then, "Aren't you going to wind me up?"

"Sorry! I'll wind you up now,"

He was quite out of breath by the time the little lady in the green garb popped her head over the side of the well. Jimmy helped her out of the bucket and they sat together on the brick wall that surrounded the well. The elf-like figure replaced her green hat, swung up her green hosed legs and emptied the water out of her brown, ankle-high boots.

Jimmy looked at the bump on the little lady's head and said, "I'm sorry about that."

"Oh, that's all right," she responded, now smiling. "I'm just happy that you came along and pulled me out. I've been down there for what seems like a year or more, with no one to talk to except the fish and the frogs, and they don't say very much. Anyway, now that I'm free, how do you do, I'm Gemma. Who are you?"

"I'm Jimmy." It was only then that Jimmy realised that he had made a new friend. A friend who did not laugh or point at his red shock of hair, his small snub nose, or his pointed ears and Gemma didn't even seem to notice his enormous feet. The very first person he had met in this new subterranean world and Gemma was actually thanking him for pulling him out of the well.

But then Gemma herself was more than a little unusual. The top of her head hardly reached as high as Jimmy's shoulder and her long, dark brown hair curled down to her shoulders.

Jimmy asked Gemma how she had been marooned at the bottom of the well. He asked why everyone was sleeping. He had so many questions to ask.

Gemma sat on the edge of the well in the warm sunshine, drying her green tunic, hose and pointed hat, and told Jimmy what had happened: "It seems I've always lived in a small cave at the bottom of the well, and it's my job to make sure that the bucket's full of water when the townsfolk come to the well. Whenever I want to come up to see my friends, all I have to do is sit in the bucket and someone will wind me up to the surface.

"The town was always a happy place to live; happy, that is until the witch who lived in the house on the hill forgot how to laugh. She had always been such a friendly, happy witch and never used her magic spells for evil purposes - that is, until the day she forgot how to laugh. Yes! She forgot how to laugh. Her very best friend Ira, a sister witch, tried many different spells to try and make Witch Matilda happy again but a heavy sadness had eaten into her heart. She had lost a special companion who had been with her for many, many years: Beatrix was a jet black cat with dark blue eyes. She was a very old cat and one day she just curled up on the bottom of the witch's bed, as usual, went to sleep, and, well, never woke up again."

"How sad", said Jimmy.

Gemma continued her tale. "Matilda cried for days and none of her friends could comfort her. This went on for many weeks and eventually, the sadness took away all her happiness and she didn't even want to smile. Then another of Matilda's friends, Floella, had a bright idea. Her cat had just had kittens and one was the spitting image of Beatrix. Floella gave Matilda the kitten and over the next few weeks, Matilda began to take an interest in things again. But she had been so sad for so long that she had forgotten how to laugh.

“She came down to the town and asked the town’s folk to show her how to laugh again, and they certainly tried. They told her funny stories, they acted the fool, did lots of silly things, and even tried tickling her with feathers, but nothing they did could make the witch laugh. Then Matilda became angry. She became so angry that she waved her magic wand and cast a spell that put everyone into a deep sleep. And they would stay asleep until the day came when the witch could laugh again.”

Gemma had been lucky. Sort of. She had been in her home in the cave at the bottom of the well when the witch waved her wand, and the spell missed her. But what could Jimmy do now to help his new friend? Gemma was too frightened to go anywhere near the witch's house, which was at the top of the hill on the south side of town. She was afraid to ask the witch if she would lift the magic spell of sleep, in case Matilda put her to sleep too, just like everyone else in the town.

Jimmy quickly made up his mind. Now that he had a new friend, he would show her how brave he could be. Of course, he was afraid, but Jimmy was determined; he would go to the house on the hill to see the witch who couldn't laugh and he would ask her to remove the magic spell.

Chapter 3

THE WITCH

That very same morning Gemma waved goodbye and Jimmy set off up the hill to the witch's house. He took long, bold paces as he marched off toward the old rambling house, but he didn't feel quite as brave as Gemma thought he was. The nearer he got to the big, forbidding house, the slower he walked. He saw a window at the side of the house and quietly crept closer, one step at a time. Very, very slowly, he stood up and peeped in through the grime coated window.

A black cauldron, bubbling and frothing, hung on a hook over an enormous log fire set in an arched stone hearth. Cooking implements, carving knives, spoons and forked prongs, hung from a long bar beneath the mantle shelf. Sitting on a three-legged stool, stirring the smoking mixture in the cauldron with a big wooden spoon, was the witch. She wore a traditional black pointed hat decorated in gold, with signs of the zodiac. A black shawl covered her shoulders and her dark green, plain and shapeless gown hung long to the floor. Only the toes of her black boots were visible beneath the hem. Long, straight black hair hung down from under her hat to reach the middle of her back. Curled around her feet was a green-eyed, jet black cat.

The witch's red-rimmed eyes were focused on the cauldron, and from what Jimmy could see, tears were rolling down her cheeks as she rocked backwards and forwards over the boiling pot. She was chanting a sad, tuneless lament as she tried to mix yet another brew that might help to make her laugh again. Every concoction she tried had failed: bat's wings, frog's spawn, spider's hairs, snake-skin oil, mashed worms and even toadstool stalks - but nothing in her book of spells would work.

Jimmy was no longer afraid. He could only feel sorry for the witch who couldn't laugh. He walked around to the front of the house and boldly raised the devil's head knocker that hung on the large wooden door. Knock! Knock! The witch didn't even get up off her stool. "Who's there?" she croaked. She knew it couldn't be anyone from the town because they were all under her sleeping spell.

Jimmy shouted through the letterbox. "Hello, Witch Matilda. My name is Jimmy. Please let me in. I know you're sad because you've forgotten how to laugh, and I've come to try to make you happy again so that you will remove the sleeping spell."

The witch lifted her head and looked quizzically towards the door. "Do you think you can make me laugh?" she asked.

"I don't know, but I would like to try," answered Jimmy. He heard her shuffling toward the door.

"If you can show me how to laugh," she said, "I will gladly lift the spell of sleep. Everyone will wake up and the town will become alive again."

She slowly opened the door which creaked on its hinges.

Her long nose preceded her chin as she thrust out her head and looked straight at Jimmy. She stopped, looked and looked again. Then, with the faintest of twinkles in her black-as-coal eyes, a small smile tugged lightly at the corners of her mouth and spread slowly over her face. Then she chuckled, and finally, she burst into laughter. She laughed and laughed until the tears flowed in rivers down her cheeks.

Jimmy didn't quite know what to do, but soon he was laughing just as hard as the witch. When she recovered some of her breath, she took hold of Jimmy and hugged him. "Why, you're the strangest boy I have ever seen. That red mop of hair and small snub nose, those pointed ears and enormous feet, I have never seen anyone quite like you. Wherever have you come from?" Jimmy was ushered into the witch's house and sitting on a wooden chair, at a table covered with a red velvet tablecloth, he explained how he had left Aunt Ethel and then stumbled down a hole in the forest floor and discovered the underground world and how he came to the town where everyone except Gemma was asleep under Matilda's spell.

"I'm sorry if I was rude to you, Jimmy, but you have helped me to remember how to laugh, and now I shall keep my promise. Come with me, down to the town."

Holding tightly onto Jimmy's hand, she led him down the hill into the market square. When they stood next to the well Matilda took out a slim, silver wand from a fold in her green gown and waved it once over her head. The wand rose from her hand into the air and circled over the town, shedding beams of magic each time it turned in the air. Slowly the sleeping bodies stirred. Yawning and stretching, the townsfolk were soon wide awake and gathered around Matilda and Jimmy and Gemma.

The witch held up her hand to collect the returning wand and also to quieten the crowd. Then she told them how this strange boy had been brave enough to come to her house on the hill to try and make her laugh. How he had looked so funny when she opened the door that she quickly remembered how to laugh, and Jimmy had laughed with her. "But," she said, turning to Jimmy, "no one in Roombelow will ever laugh at you again. Your bravery has saved this town from the curse of my sleeping spell."

Mr McDonald, the bald, rather rotund Mayor, replied. "On behalf of the people of Roombelow, may I offer our thanks for what you have done for us today. Your bravery has earned our warmest praise. You're welcome to stay in Roombelow for as long as you wish. My house is your house Jimmy, and my wife, Amanda, and I would consider it an honour if you would stay with us as our guest."

Jimmy was overjoyed. He was hailed as a hero and had found a new home. Roombelow was a happy town again and he had found many new friends - Mr McDonald, the Mayor, his wife Amanda, Matilda the Witch, Gemma, the little lady who lived at the bottom of the well, and many, many more of the townsfolk folk. He decided that this was just the sort of place where he could happily live, with no more taunts about his strange appearance.

Now, running away is not usually a very sensible thing to do, but, just this once things seem to have worked out well.

Chapter 4

THE FLOOD

The weeks passed by so quickly in the underground world. Jimmy Crikey stayed in the town of Roombelow with Mr McDonald, the Mayor, and his loving wife Amanda. She was almost like a carbon copy of Jimmy's Aunt Ethel and they hit it off from the start. Almost every day, after school classes, he and Gemma would walk up to the house on the hill to visit Matilda the witch. She allowed the two friends to explore the old house, which was filled with many strange and wonderful things. Sometimes Matilda would tell stories about the magical powers of the things they found, like the solid silver bowl, always full of fresh milk. No matter how often the milk was poured out, the bowl always filled up again with more milk, and it never turned sour. There was a crystal ball, which stood in the centre of the table, into which Matilda would stare when she wanted to talk to any of her many witch sisters. There was Sister Witch Ira who had the power to search the skies. There was Sister Ellwin, a water spirit, who wafted over every form of water. Sister Floella was the spirit of the earth.

Among the treasures, there was also a special pair of spectacles to help Matilda see things in the dark. They even found a magic ring which, when worn on the little

finger of the left hand, allowed whoever was wearing it to talk with the animals. Jimmy and Gemma spent many happy hours rediscovering the host of magical treasures which Matilda had long forgotten and discarded.

Life for Jimmy had become idyllic. Yes, he still had to attend school every weekday but lessons were no longer full of trials and tribulations. He was no longer singled out as being special and clumsy. Jimmy was just accepted as one of the children of Roombelow. No one made fun of him anymore.

Everything was rolling along, just fine until the morning Jimmy was awakened, by the angry sound of heavy raindrops hammering against the windowpane.

Oh! Well! he thought it will soon stop. It hardly ever rains during the day in Roombelow.

But the rain lashed down harder as the morning slowly passed. By mid-day, when Jimmy looked out of the classroom window again, large pools were beginning to cover the cobblestones in the town square. He could hardly see the well. The well! He had forgotten about Gemma at the bottom of the well. He dashed out of school, into the pouring rain, threw the bucket over the side of the well and quickly pulled up his friend. Together they dashed back into Mr McDonald's house and the two friends stood in front of the fire to dry their wet clothes.

"Has your cave flooded?" Jimmy asked Gemma.

"No. The stream that flows at the bottom of the well is flowing faster but the level has hardly changed. I think it drops over a waterfall after it flows past my home."

But Amanda was by now very worried. "If it doesn't stop raining soon, the whole town will flood," she said.

Other townsfolk were worried too and they came to see the Mayor, asking him what to do, but Mr McDonald didn't know what to do. "I've never known it to rain so heavily for as long as this before," he said. "Perhaps you had all better move your children and furniture upstairs just in case the town gets flooded."

The pools in the town square grew bigger and deeper. By the middle of the afternoon, the square was covered with a lake of water which began to trickle over thresholds and under doors into the houses.

"Whatever can we do?" asked Amanda.

What can anyone do? Jimmy thought for a while and then announced. "I'm going to see Witch Matilda. Perhaps she can suggest something." He persuaded Gemma to stay with Mr McDonald, pulled a cape over his shoulders and set off up the hill to Matilda's house.

Jimmy shook the water off his cape and entered the witch's house. He was such a welcomed visitor that he didn't even have to knock. Matilda had told him, "Just come straight on in and, if I'm not around, help yourself to a drink until I get back." She looked up from her book of spells. "Ah! Jimmy!" she said. "I've been searching for a spell to stop the rain but I can't find one."

"If you can't, perhaps one of your witch friends can help," Jimmy suggested.

Matilda reached into a cupboard and took out the crystal ball, placed it in the centre of the table and darkened the room by drawing the curtains. She sat next to

Jimmy at the table and moved her hands over the ball. The crystal clouded over and then began to shine brightly from its very centre. Soon the light softened and in the globe, there appeared an image of one of her witch sisters. She talked to all of her witch friends, but no one knew of a spell that would stop the rain. The very last witch Matilda talked to was Ira, and Ira thought it might help if someone would go to see the great White Owl of the mountains because he was a very wise, old owl and would surely know how to stop the rain. But Ira did not know on which mountain the White Owl lived.

Jimmy had an idea. "If you could loan me your magic ring, Matilda, I'll go up into the mountains and talk with the animals. Perhaps they have seen the great White Owl, and they may be able to give me directions."

Matilda agreed, so Jimmy put the ring on the little finger of his left hand, threw his cape around his shoulders again, and set off on the track to the mountains, through the pouring rain.

Chapter 5

THE WEATHERMAN

Jimmy was quickly on his way, steadily and carefully climbing up the first mountain in his search for the wise old owl. The rain was still falling furiously and he was by now soaking wet and quite uncomfortable. The cold rain had seeped through his cape and ran down his neck. He passed a rabbit who was looking out of its burrow.

“Excuse me, but I’m looking for the Great White Owl. Have you seen him?” Jimmy asked.

“No!” the surprised rabbit replied. “But you could try asking the sheep, they live further up the mountain.”

Finding the sheep wasn’t easy. They were sheltering behind rocks, under overhanging ledges, and even in gullies, trying to keep themselves and their young lambs dry. Near the top of the mountain, Jimmy found them and asked, “Please can you help me? Do you know where the Great White Owl lives?”

“Baa!” said one of the oldest sheep, a ram with great curling horns. “White Owl certainly does not live on this mountain. You could try asking Charlie Raven. He does a lot of flying around, so he might know.”

“Thank you,” said Jimmy, “but where will I find Charlie Raven?”

The sheep told Jimmy he would find Raven sheltering in a hole in the old, gnarled beech tree, at the bottom of the tallest mountain.

“But which mountain is the tallest?” Jimmy asked. “They’re all covered with dark clouds and it’s impossible to see through the rain.”

“It’s the third mountain on the left,” the ram answered, pulling his head back under the shelter of the rock, out of the rain.

Jimmy ran down the mountainside and along the shingle track towards the third mountain on the left. Just as the ram had told him, there stood the old beech tree. He walked up to it and shouted, “Hello! Are you there, Mr Raven!”

Charlie Raven reluctantly stuck his beak out of a hole halfway up the trunk. “Whatever is a boy like you doing out in weather like this?”

“I have to find the Great White Owl, and the sheep told me that you would know where to find him.”

“Oh! That’s easy,” said Charlie. “You will find him at the top of this very mountain. He is a very wise, old, mountain owl and when it rains he flies higher, up through the clouds, to where the sky will still be clear and bright.”

“Thank you very much,” said Jimmy. “I have to get up there quickly. Thanks again, Mr Raven.”

Jimmy continued the climb up the mountain as fast as he could go, through the rain and the clouds. After a short while, he emerged into the bright sunshine at the very tip of the mountain top. There, on a rock, sat the Great White Owl, dozing in the warmth of the sun.

“Hrm! Hrm!” coughed Jimmy politely, because he didn’t quite know what to say to the owl.

Owl opened one eye and blinked at him. “What can I do for you, my boy?”

“Well, er, you see, sir,” stuttered Jimmy. “Ira the witch, who is a friend of Matilda the witch, said that if anyone knew how to stop the rain, it would be you.”

“Stop the rain? But we *need* the rain,” said Owl, now wide awake.

“Yes, sir, but it’s been raining so hard for so long that Roombelow will be flooded if it doesn’t stop soon. The water level has already risen to the thresholds of the doorways. Soon it will flood into the houses.”

“Ah!” said the wise old owl. “There is only one person who can stop the rain. The Weather Man.”

“Where will I find him?” asked Jimmy.

“In his cloud, of course,” said Owl.

“But how do I find his cloud among all these rain clouds?”

“You need my help,” said Owl. “Come here, boy, and I will sprinkle your feet with stardust.” Owl reached deeply into his downy feathers and withdrew a small, oval, glass vial. He took out the stopper and shook the vial vigorously. Jimmy’s feet were enveloped in a cloud of sparkling crystals. “There! Now you can walk across the tops of the clouds. Look for a round white cloud. It should be easy to find it amongst all these black clouds. That’s where the Weather Man lives.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Jimmy, stepping off the mountain onto the tops of the clouds. “I hope we meet again.” But the Great White Owl did not hear - he had already tucked his head under a wing and was fast asleep.

Running and skipping over the clouds, it didn’t take Jimmy long to spot the solitary, round, white cloud contrasted against the dark of the storm clouds. With only a few cloud topping steps, he was standing on its fluffy white top.

There was a hole through the top of the cloud and a ladder led down, inside, to a room full of knobs, dials, and levers. Jimmy climbed down and had a look around. There was no sign of the Weather Man in the control room. Then he heard the sound of someone snoring. He moved aside a red, velvet curtain, and behind it, stretched out on a low cot sized bed, fast asleep, was the Weatherman.

The Weatherman wore a red, Noddy style cap, which fell forward over his brow. The golden tassels at the end rose and fell with every snore. Perched above his nose was a pair of half framed spectacles. Beneath his nose grew a long white moustache and an equally long beard. His green robe glowed and shimmered like silk and his matching shoes ended with curled over toes.

Jimmy gently shook the Weather Man, who woke up, rubbed his eyes, scratched his long white beard and then sat up. "Why! Hello there! Goodness me, what are you doing here boy and, more to the point, how did you get here?"

Jimmy told him the long story and then said, "Please, Mr Weatherman, can you stop the rain before Roombelow is flooded?"

"Yes! Yes!" said the Weatherman. "I must have forgotten to turn off the rain before I went to sleep." He moved over to the controls and turned the knobs and pulled the levers - and the rain immediately stopped. He pressed a switch and a gentle breeze started to blow the clouds away. He turned the big wheel and the sky shone brighter and warmer. "That will soon dry the water up," he said. "Now I'd better take you back home."

Mr McDonald and Amanda, Matilda the witch and Gemma, as well as many of the townsfolk, were gathered in the town square. The rain had stopped, the clouds had disappeared, the sun was beating down and the puddles were drying up.

Gemma was the first one to notice a white cloud, getting closer and closer. "Look!" she said in her high-pitched voice. "That cloud. It's falling out of the sky." Everyone looked up and, as the cloud came nearer, they moved back in fear. The cloud floated gently down to the ground, stopped for a moment and then started to rise again. When every wisp of the cloud had gone, who was left standing there but Jimmy. The Weatherman had carried him home in his cloud. Jimmy gave a last wave to the cloud before his friends surrounded him. The crowd wanted to add their congratulations and to hear how Jimmy had met the Weather Man.

So, the next time you see a single, round, white cloud in a clear blue sky, remember Jimmy's adventure and give a thought to the Weatherman. Give him a wave. He may be watching you.

Chapter 6

THE EMPTY WELL

Jimmy's best friend, Gemma, lived in a small, comfortably furnished cave at the bottom of the well in the centre of Roombelow's town square. Every morning, whenever the bucket was lowered for water, Gemma's task was to make sure that the battered, old, wooden bucket was filled to the brim with fresh water from the stream. Then she would shout up the shaft, "Haul away!" and the bucket would be wound slowly back to the surface. When Gemma found herself in the cave at the bottom of the well she could not recall how she had got there.

The people of Roombelow were so pleased to have Gemma's help that they donated small pieces of furniture to make her home a comfortable place to stay. She had a bed with a bedside lamp on a set of small drawers. There was a little round table and wooden stool made especially for her by the carpenter in Roombelow. Everything had to be made small so that they could lower it down the well at the end of a rope. Every day the town's people would send down food and drink in the empty bucket and each afternoon, when work was over for the day, they would wind her up

to the surface. Then, when Jimmy and the other children returned home from school, they were free to spend time together.

No one in Roombelow made fun of Jimmy's bright red mop of hair, nor his pointed ears and they never referred to his enormous feet. To them, Jimmy was the hero who rescued them from Matilda's sleeping spell and the one who found the Weatherman and stopped the rain before the town was flooded.

When Matilda cast her sleeping spell over the town, Gemma had been marooned in her cave at the bottom of the well. Gemma was different from the rest of the people in Roombelow. She was much smaller than everyone else but no one knew where she came from. Around her neck, hanging on a thin gold necklace was a single, precious, sparkling stone. A gemstone as beautiful as the diamond in Aunt Ethel's wedding ring, but much, much bigger. When Matilda cast the sleeping spell Gemma had been stuck at the bottom of the well for such a long time that she had learned to talk the language of the fish. She made lots of fish friends, with whom she whiled away many an hour until Jimmy arrived in Roombelow and unexpectedly rescued her.

Gemma and Jimmy's friendship flourished. Sometimes they would venture off on their own, away from Roombelow, to explore the vast underground world, discovering many an enchanted valley and grottoes of great beauty. On other occasions, they spent the whole day in the house on the hill, home of Matilda the witch. Matilda's home was a gold mine of glorious secrets, forgotten trinkets, mystical trappings and magical wonders which were a constant source of fascination to the friends.

A very close and happy friendship grew between the diminutive lady from the bottom of the well, under Roombelow, and the strange-looking boy from the world above. Jimmy was happy in his new surroundings, in his new “almost” family, not that his Aunt Ethel was ever very far from his thoughts. He hoped she would understand why he had left her love and care. Jimmy was determined to return to Esh Village as soon as he could so that he could explain everything to his aunt.

Early one fine morning, as they usually did, Mr McDonald and Jimmy came to the well for water. Jimmy lowered the bucket and waited for Gemma to give her usual shout of, “Haul away!” Then Mr McDonald would wind the bucket back up to the surface. But today there was no shout. They waited a moment more, and then Jimmy leaned over the brick wall and shouted down. “Are you there, Gemma?”

“Yes!” shouted back Gemma.

Mr McDonald looked surprised and in his very deep gravelly voice asked, “Are you all right down there?”

Back came another high pitched, “Yes!”

“Is the bucket full yet?” Mr McDonald’s voice rumbled down the well.

“No! It’s not!” was Gemma’s reply.

Jimmy was concerned. He shouted down, “Whatever is wrong, Gemma?”

Gemma’s answer was quite a shock. “The water isn’t deep enough to fill the bucket.”

Mr McDonald had had enough of this shouting up and down, and he told Gemma to climb into the bucket so that he could wind her up to the surface.

Only when the small figure of Gemma was sitting safely alongside Jimmy on the wall of the well did Mr McDonald speak again. "There has always been plenty of water in the well and now you tell me there isn't enough to fill the bucket! What has happened down there, Gemma?"

"The well is fed by an underground stream," Gemma replied, "but for some reason, the stream is not as deep as it usually is. I don't know what is happening."

Nor did Jimmy, but he was determined to find out why the stream was drying up. "Please, can we borrow your boat, Mr McDonald?" Jimmy asked. "Gemma's boat is too small for me."

"Certainly," said Mr McDonald, "provided that there's plenty of water left to float a boat in. Is there, Gemma?"

"There is at the moment," said Gemma, "but the water level is falling all the time."

"Then we'd better hurry," said Jimmy. "Will you come with me?" he asked Gemma.

"Of course!" piped his little friend. "We will have to follow the stream through the many tunnels and caves and, if you take me along to talk to the fish, they may be able to help us."

Mr Sawyer, the carpenter, was called to dismantle the tiled roof that protected the well and the wooden roller. Mr McDonald and Mr Sawyer lifted the heavy roller off

the bearing that held it in place. Then Mr Porker, the butcher, and Mr Trimitt, the Tailor, carefully lowered the flat-bottomed boat down the well-shaft on a long rope line. Then Jimmy and Gemma were lowered to the bottom of the well. They loaded all the supplies they needed for their journey. Food, drink and dry clothing were securely packed. The oars were mounted in the oar-locks, and long poles were laid on the deck before they waved farewell to their friends.

Jimmy rowed and Gemma held up the oil lamp to light their way through the cold dark tunnels. The damp walls reflected the light of the lamp and cast creeping shadows about them, as slowly they made their way along, following the twisting course of the stream.

It took an age before they met one of Gemma's fish friends and, when they did, Gemma leaned over the prow of the boat and asked where all the other fish and frogs had disappeared to. Jimmy, of course, could not understand the strange gurgling sounds the fish made, and he wished he had remembered to bring Matilda's magic ring, the one which allowed the wearer to talk with animals. But then, he wasn't sure if a fish was the same as an animal.

He waited patiently until the gurgling and burbling stopped and then asked, "What was all that about?"

Gemma explained. "Most of my fish friends swam further upstream to try and find deeper pools where they may be safe for a while longer, even if the stream dries up completely. A few may even have gone to where they believe there is an enormous lake which will never dry up. Fiona, that's the name of the fish I'm talking to, has told me where she thinks the lake is. We must turn left at the next tunnel and then take

the second tunnel on the right. Fiona will guide us part of the way, but she is afraid to swim into the lake. Some friends of hers went exploring that way some months ago and have never been seen again.”

Both Jimmy and Gemma were a little apprehensive now, but they had to continue their journey. They had to find out why the stream was drying up.

Fiona led them slowly, deeper and deeper into the honeycombs of caves and tunnels, following the twists and turns as the stream trickled past the boat.

After swimming for quite some distance, Fiona stopped, raised her head into the glow of Gemma’s lamp and gurgled gently to her. This was as far as she dared to go. She splashed her tail onto the water, as if to say goodbye, and then swam back down the stream towards the deep pool where her family was waiting.

Now Jimmy and Gemma were on their own. Somewhere ahead lay the lake that Fiona was so afraid of.

Chapter 7

THE GREEN CAVERN

Jimmy and Gemma continued their journey through the maze of tunnels but soon the tunnel they were travelling through became so narrow that Jimmy could no longer use the oars. Instead, he used the pole to push the boat forward. Gemma sat at the front, showing the way with the fading light of the lamp.

“Steady, Jimmy,” piped Gemma, and Jimmy could see that the roof of the tunnel was getting lower and lower. Finally, the rocky roof hung so low that he couldn’t use the pole, so, while Gemma crouched in the bow, he lay down on the bottom of the boat and tried to pull the boat along with his hands grasping at the roof. Further progress was slow as Jimmy struggled to get a grip on the slippery, slimy stone.

Then everything went black. “Light the lamp again,” said Jimmy.

“I can’t,” said Gemma. “The oil must have run out.” Silence. “What do we do now, Jimmy?”

“Why, we go on, of course,” said Jimmy, not feeling quite as brave as he sounded. And on they went. Hand over hand, pulling and pushing the boat through the blackness.

Then the roof began to rise higher over their heads. Soon they were able to sit up and use the pole again to propel their boat against the slowing current. Gemma noticed first. “I think it’s getting lighter.” The roof was now beyond head height and the tunnel was wider, wide enough for Jimmy to use the oars again. “Where is the light coming from?” asked Gemma.

“Shhh!” replied Jimmy. The eerie glow was brighter now and the tunnel continued to get wider. “Where has the roof gone?” asked Gemma trembling from head to toe.

“Shhh!” repeated Jimmy. The roof was now so high they could no longer see it.

They rounded an outcrop of rock and before them lay a lake. It was an enormous green lake, lit by an emerald glow that seemed to come from the inside of the walls of the vast cavern. The whole scene was breath-taking. The lake was beautiful. The panorama was vast and frightening.

Their whispers echoed softly as they wondered what they should do next.

“We’ve come this far,” whispered Jimmy. “We can’t turn back now.”

The oars swished through the still, deep, green waters and Jimmy rowed strongly on. Gemma’s mouth was dry and she took a sip of her drink to quench her thirst and quell her fear.

“What’s that noise?” quavered Gemma, but Jimmy had already stopped rowing and the boat drifted silently on. He too could hear the whisper of sound that was rapidly increasing. As they progressed further into the cavern the sound grew louder and at last, they could see the source of the noise.

A brilliant blue waterfall dropped from the roof of the cavern down to the deep green waters of the lake. The waterfall that tumbled over the shelf up in the roof wasn’t very wide, but it was the most beautiful sight that either Jimmy or Gemma had ever seen.

They were so spellbound that they didn’t realise their boat had drifted toward the rocky shore. The hull of the boat grated over the shingles and came to a gentle halt among the pebbles, but they could hardly tear their eyes away from the spectacle.

Some seconds passed before Jimmy could see that the lake was teeming with fish - some red, some gold, some silver, blue and oh! every colour of the rainbow, mixed up in that clear, green water. Suddenly the spell was broken by a cry from Gemma. “Oh gosh! Jimmy! Help!” Jimmy turned around quickly.

“What’s wrong, Gemma?”

“A hand! I saw a hand! I saw a hand in the water,” gasped Gemma.

“Nonsense!” exclaimed Jimmy. “There are only fish in the water and fish don’t have hands. Do they?”

“Oh, but some of us have,” answered a strange voice. It wasn’t Gemma’s high pitched voice that had answered. The new voice had a strange burbling, gurgling tone

that reminded Jimmy very much of Fiona's fish talk. "Why it's a talking fish," said a very surprised Jimmy.

Gemma told him, "That's not a fish. Fish don't have hands."

"But it *is* a fish," said Jimmy. "See there! Look! It has a scaly tail."

Then the warbling came again. "Of course, I have a tail. I also have a body, two arms, two hands, two eyes and a head." And then the fish, or was it a man, pulled itself onto the pebbly shore and sat on a rock. "See!" it said. "I'm half a fish and half a man. There are lots of us here, but we hid when we heard you coming. Now that I know you mean us no harm, I will call my friends."

He began to beat the water with his tail, and the ripples spread out over the lake. More ripples appeared and soon there were as many as were ten or twelve more heads bobbing alongside the boat, warbling their "Hello's" to the two friends.

Once Gemma, at last, found the courage to uncover her eyes, she sat agog. Jimmy asked the half-fish, half-man, "Who are you?"

"I am Milton," answered the creature, "and these are my friends, the Aquamites. This is the land of Aquarius where we have lived for thousands of years. We never grow old, you see. But just at the moment, we are a little overcrowded. So many fish have travelled to our lake, seeking safety, because their rivers and streams are drying up and ..."

"But that is why we're here," interrupted Jimmy. "The stream that flows from your lake fills our well, in the town of Roombelow. But soon there will be no water left for our friends to drink."

“And no water for the fish to swim in,” added Gemma.

“We are trying to find out what has happened to the water,” went on Jimmy.

“We too would like to know what has happened,” said Milton. “Look at our waterfall.”

“It’s beautiful,” said Jimmy.

Milton waved his arm “But that is just a trickle. The whole side of the cave should be covered with a blue curtain of cascading water.”

“What a wonderful sight that must be. But why isn’t it like that now? What has happened to the water?”

“We don’t know,” answered Milton sadly, “and we cannot find out. Being an Aquamite is all very well and good for living in water, but we can’t climb up there,” he said, pointing up to the rocky shelf in the roof of the cavern.

“I don’t think anyone can climb up there,” chimed in Gemma.

“Someone must,” said Jimmy, “and, as you are too small, it will have to be me.”

Chapter 8

THE RED CAVE

Once again Jimmy put aside his trepidation. He was more intent on helping his friends and that took his mind off the dangers. Jimmy set off on the almost vertical climb, up to the roof of the cavern. Gemma told him to be very, very careful, and the Aquamites wished him luck.

Jimmy had climbed plenty of trees before and even a mountain or two, but this was the first time he had tried to climb a sheer wall of rock. His hands kept slipping on the damp surfaces and there were times when the only thing that saved him from falling was the firm foothold his enormous feet gave him. He remembered how the children in the upper world had laughed at his strange appearance and his enormous feet. They would not laugh if they could see him now, clinging and climbing, up and up and up.

Only when Jimmy had reached the safety of the rocky shelf did he dare to look down. He unfastened the rope, which had been around his waist, and tied it off around a large rock. He waved to the tiny figure of Gemma, standing far, far below, then

turned to face the unknown and took his first steps into the tunnel, through which the stream trickled toward him.

At first, there was just the slightest glow of light, now of a blue hue, and gradually it became bright enough to light the shadows and show the way. Jimmy had walked almost a mile along the tunnel by the edge of the trickling stream. He was feeling rather tired and was about to sit down for a rest when he noticed that the tunnel had become wider and higher. Perhaps there was another cavern just ahead. So, on he went, and within a few strides, he was out of the tunnel into a cave, a cave that glowed red. The red cave was not as high as the green cave but was still an enormous space, with a deep pool in the centre. In a large basin sunk deep into the stone floor, there was a dark pool. Water trickled over the edge of the basin, ran through the blue tunnel and eventually plummeted down over the rocky shelf to make the blue waterfall that filled the lake in the green cavern.

Jimmy had found the underground pool, filled by an underground spring, that supplied the stream which fed the well in the town of Roombelow. But why was there not enough water flowing from the spring for the Aquamites, the fish, the frogs and the people of Roombelow?

He moved closer to the dark pool which reflected the red walls of the cave. Then he saw the hideous smile on the enormous mouth of a gigantic eel. The eel's long black body was coiled around in spirals that filled the rocky basin of the pool. Jimmy could now see why the underground streams had almost dried up. The giant eel's body tapered to a tail that almost disappeared down the hole from where the underground spring bubbled up. The eel's tail was acting like a giant stopper.

Jimmy pondered. The eel stared. Jimmy could see what the problem was, but what could he do about it? He needed Gemma's help. Jimmy couldn't talk to an eel, but Gemma might be able to. There was only one thing to do. He must go back for Gemma. Slowly he backed away from the giant eel, which watched him but didn't try to stop him. When he reached the tunnel, he turned and ran as fast as he could, splashing through the shallow stream. He didn't stop until he reached the rocky shelf in the roof of the green cavern.

Several moments passed before he recovered sufficient breath and was able to shout down to Gemma. "Tie yourself to the end of the rope." His voice echoed. "I need your help."

Gemma was more than a little afraid, but if her best friend needed her help, then she would do as Jimmy asked. She tied the end of the rope around her tiny waist, knotted it tightly, and closed her eyes. She kept them closed as she was pulled up the vertical rock wall until she felt Jimmy's hand taking hers. Gemma had safely reached the rocky shelf and gasped with relief, glad to be safe, alongside her friend.

While she sat, recovering from her frightening hoist up the cliff face, Jimmy told her what he had found in the red cave.

"You have to talk to the giant eel," he told Gemma. "We must find out where it has come from." "But the eel may not understand fish talk," said Gemma.

"We won't know that until you try. Come on, Gemma. We must hurry."

And off they went, back to the red cave and the giant eel.

Chapter 9

FIND THE SEA

The giant eel was still curled up in the pool when Gemma and Jimmy reached the red cave. It watched them approach.

“Go on, Gemma,” said Jimmy. “Speak to it. It looks friendly.”

Gemma cautiously approached and started to make gurgling fishy sounds and then quickly stepped back, startled as the giant eel slowly raised its massive head. It moved to the side of the pool. Then it started to make the same gurgling noises that Gemma had made.

Gemma was delighted. “He likes me. He really likes me, Jimmy. And he understands me. His name is Larson and he wants to know where he is and how we found him.”

Then followed a long fishy conversation between the little lady and the giant eel. Jimmy waited patiently until Gemma had finished talking to the eel. Then it was the eel’s turn to wait while Gemma recounted the story to Jimmy. She told Jimmy of how the giant eel had started life as a tiny elver in a small stream, but then the time came

when all eels must meet together in an enormous far away sea. The eel's name was Larson and he had lost his way when the river he was swimming in carried him underground. Eventually, he was swept into this deep pool in the red cave. And here he had stayed, growing bigger and bigger, until eventually, his body blocked off the flow of water. He wanted to get back to the sea but couldn't find a route through the maze of tunnels. Larson was sorry. He didn't know that other fish, animals and people needed the water, but what could he do? He couldn't find a way out.

Larson was no longer smiling. Large tears were rolling from his big sad eyes, splashing into red rippled reflections in the pool.

"Tell him to stop crying," said Jimmy. "We'll find a way to get him back to the sea. That will solve his problem and ours. Once he's out of the pool and in the sea, the stream will start to flow faster and it will soon fill our well again."

Gemma burbled Jimmy's message and Larson stopped crying. The smile returned to his face and he told Gemma he would wait there until they found a way to get him back to the sea.

Off went the two pals searching through the tunnels and caves. Jimmy was pleased that Gemma was with him to ask the way of the fish and frogs they met on their search. But only a few of them had even heard of the sea and none knew where it was.

Eventually, they came to yet another large cave, with a small rocky pool and lots of further passages leading off into the darkness. Jimmy did not know which of the passages to take, and he decided they should sit down and have a snack while they rested. When they had eaten the bread, cheese and buttered scones, they moved to

the pool to take a drink of its clear water. They bent their heads and Jimmy was sure he saw one or two fish eyes peeping from behind the rocks. Gemma finished drinking and stood up ready to leave.

“Don’t go yet,” said Jimmy. “You haven’t asked these fish if they know where the sea is.”

“But I can’t see any fish,” said Gemma.

“That’s because they are hiding,” replied Jimmy. “Perhaps they are afraid of us.”

“I’ll let them know we mean no harm,” trilled Gemma. Gently Gemma gurgled greetings to the fish hiding among the rocks. Slowly, one by one, they came into the edge of the pool in answer to her request for help. Gemma could hardly contain her excitement. “Yes! They have heard of the sea. It’s quite close by. Along that passage there. Sometimes the crabs call in for a chat and tell them stories of the great deep sea. A little further along and the floor of the tunnel rises steeply, turns and then drops sharply, right into the bottom of the sea. The bend in the tunnel stops the sea from coming into here.”

“That’s wonderful news,” said Jimmy. “Come on Gemma. We’ll have to get back and tell Larson.”

Gemma thanked the fish and joined hands with Jimmy as they skipped their way back through the tunnels and passages to the red cave.

Chapter 10

ESCAPE

Larson was delighted to hear Gemma gurgle the good news, and his face filled with the happiest of eel smiles you've ever seen.

"It's all very well knowing the way, but how will we get Larson out of the pool, through the passages and into the sea?" asked Jimmy.

Gemma had no answer to that and sat dejected on a rock with her head between her tiny hands. Larson could see something was wrong and he wriggled over and nudged Gemma. He wanted to know why the pals were now so sad after bringing the good news.

Gemma explained what the problem was but Larson was not at all unhappy. He raised his huge head and laughed and laughed. Jimmy sat there with his eyes wide and his mouth gaping. The red cave rocked with the roar of Larson's laughter. Then he uncoiled his long body and slithered out of the pool, alongside Gemma and Jimmy. He told Gemma, who in turn told Jimmy, that eels can travel on land even though they live in water. Didn't everyone know that?

The problem was no longer a problem and, with Jimmy and Gemma leading the way, Larson the giant eel slithered his way along behind them, through the twisting tunnels and passages to the cave with the rocky pool. The shy fish hid when they saw the giant eel wriggling past into the passage that led to the bottom of the sea.

Larson said his thanks to the friends, and his massive head was in the sea before his tail flicked a last wave of goodbye and he disappeared forever around the bend in the tunnel.

Now the time had come for the happy adventurers to return to Roombelow with the marvellous news.

They quickly retraced their steps to the red cave where the underground spring was now bubbling and frothing. It had filled the rock basin to overflowing now that Larson was no longer stopping its flow. The pair hurried back to the rocky shelf in the roof of the green cavern.

Jimmy tied the rope around Gemma's waist and quickly lowered her down to the shingle shore where the Aquamites were waiting. Then he started his hazardous downward climb. It was faster going down with the rope to hold onto, but before he reached the bottom he was thoroughly soaked through. The stream was flowing faster, flooding over the rocky shelf, spreading out to cover the whole width of the cavern with its cold, blue curtain.

At last, Jimmy emerged from the water that cascaded over him. Milton greeted him at the edge of the green lake.

“There is no time to thank you properly for saving the fish and restoring our wonderful waterfall. You must be quick. The water will flow quickly through the tunnels. It will flood some of them to the roof level. You have saved our lake and the lives of the fish, now you must hurry to save your own lives.”

Jimmy rowed as he had never rowed before, heading for the tunnel that had brought them to Aqualand. They had to get past the point where the roof came down very low, otherwise, they would be trapped. They were almost there, but the stream was flowing faster now, like a river in flood. He lost the oars in the darkness as the tunnel walls narrowed. The current carried them along even faster.

“Down!” shouted Gemma from the front of the boat and, just in time, they threw themselves onto the floor as the tunnel roof began scraping along right over their heads.

Then they were clear, but the danger was not over. The stream had become a torrent of water carrying their small craft through the blackness with alarming speed, crashing it from side to side against the walls of the tunnels.

“Keep down,” yelled Jimmy, “and hold on for your life.”

Their frightening ride seemed to last a lifetime. But finally, it ended. There came a deafening crash and the boat was thrown against a solid wall of rock. It broke up into a thousand pieces and Jimmy just had time to grab Gemma’s tiny hand before the current swept them on. He struggled to keep their heads above the rising, surging water, but he was tired and weary. He wouldn’t be able to hold on much longer. Gemma was slipping from his grasp.

Just as it seemed they both must perish, the foaming water carried them up. Yes, up! They had reached the well and were carried up between its steep walls. Pop!! They shot out of the shaft like a cork from a bottle and landed in a tangled heap by the side of the well - tired out, soaking wet, but safe and unhurt, back with the people of Roombelow.

Mr McDonald gently lifted Jimmy in his big arms. Mr Trimitt picked Gemma up. Amanda and Matilda the friendly witch were waiting too.

“We don’t know how you did it,” she said, “but you’ve saved the town again. We’re all anxious to hear your story, but first, you are going to get out of those wet clothes, into a warm bath, have a bowl of hot soup and off to bed for both of you.”

“All right,” said a tired Jimmy. “We’ll tell you all about it tomorrow.” And the pair were carried lovingly into the warmth of the Mayor’s house where Amanda was already heating the water for the bath.

The route back to the underworld’s emerald lake was now completely flooded. It is doubtful that Gemma or Jimmy will ever again see the friends they met during that adventure, but I’m sure they will never forget: Fiona, the fish who first led the way; Milton and the Aquamites, and Larson the friendly giant eel. How strange it was that Jimmy and Gemma were separated from their homes, just as Larson had been from his home. But at least Larson was now on his way to his home in the ocean.

Gemma did not know where her home was and although Jimmy had lived most his life with Aunt Ethel he knew in his heart that Esh Village was not his true home either. Where was home for the two friends? For the moment it was Roombelow.

Chapter 11

MAGIC MUSHROOMS

One day, not long after their adventure with Larson the giant eel, Jimmy and Gemma walked up the hill to visit Witch Matilda, as often they did. While she was busy brewing potions, they searched around in cupboards, in corners, in drawers and on dusty shelves, often finding some magic trinket that Matilda had misplaced and lost in the jumble of her home, in the house on the hill.

This particular day Matilda didn't pay any attention to the two rummaging friends. She was too busy boiling up a brew in the great black cauldron that hung over the ever-burning log fire. Muttering and moaning, she stirred the ingredients: bats' wings, frogs' legs, spiders' eyes, hedgehog's toe-nails, wild herbs and melted virgin snow from the highest mountain peak.

"Tut, tut!" she muttered to herself. "The most important ingredient and I've none left. Oh, dear! None left."

Jimmy had heard her mutterings and asked, "Matilda, is there anything we can do to help?"

“I’m right out of toadstools, Jimmy, and I don’t think I have sufficient strength left to go and pick some more.”

“No need to worry about that,” piped up Gemma. “We’ll soon pick some for you. I’ve seen lots of toadstools in the field behind Mr McDonald’s house.”

“Ah! Gemma!” she sighed. “I’m afraid this brew needs rather special toadstools. They grow only in the depths of a dark forest in a far-off land. Hidden deep in the forest is a magic circle of seven crooked oak trees. The black toadstools grow beneath the carpet of fallen leaves in the centre of the magic circle, and only those toadstools will complete my brew of the potion of power.”

“Potion of power?” queried Jimmy.

“That’s right,” replied Matilda. “I need the potion to restore my failing powers. Without it, I will grow weaker and weaker, and older and older until I finally disappear in a pile of dust.”

Immediately, Jimmy and Gemma jumped forward to offer their assistance but, at first, Matilda would not hear of it. “I cannot ask you to undertake such a journey,” she said. “The circle of crooked oak trees is in a strange land far away and far above us.”

“The land above!” cried Jimmy. “But that is where I came from, and the hole I fell into was in a dark forest. It may be the very same forest, Matilda.”

“It certainly sounds like it,” she said. “Dare you return to the world you ran away from?”

“Of course, we dare,” chimed in Gemma.

“Sorry, Gemma,” said Jimmy, “but Matilda is becoming weaker by the hour and needs to rest. I think you should stay and help look after her until I return.”

Gemma was reluctant to be left behind, but she didn’t protest and promised to take great care of Matilda.

“Good,” said Jimmy. “That will also allow me to call on Aunt Ethel, just to let her know I’m safe and well.”

It was decided, and Jimmy set off alone along the road that had brought him to Roombelow those many months ago. Over the hills and through the fields, he hurried until he reached the bottom of the hole in the base of the cliff wall. Climbing back up the hole through the tangle of tree roots took longer than falling into it, but, after a struggle, he managed to pull himself to the top. There he lay awhile, panting on the grass-covered floor of the forest.

As soon as he recovered his breath, he began the search among the animal paths and tracks. Matilda’s ring, which he wore on the little finger of his left hand, allowed him to question the animals of the forest and, with their help, he soon found the circle of seven crooked oak trees. Just as Matilda had told him, in the centre of the circle, under the carpet of fallen leaves, growing in a patch of rich brown earth, he found the magical, black toadstools. He filled his rucksack with as many as he could carry and then, without wasting any more time, he headed for the home of his beloved Aunt Ethel.

There was a remarkable surprise waiting for him when he walked unannounced into Aunt Ethel’s warm kitchen. There on the table was a glass of creamy, fresh milk, a plate of biscuits and his favourite sultana and cherry cake.

“I always knew you would keep your promise to come back one day, just to let me know that all was well,” Aunt Ethel said, as happy tears rolled down her plump cheeks and wetted Jimmy’s face while she hugged and kissed him. “My dreams have a habit of coming true and last night I had a dream that today would be that day.

“Now come and sit down beside the fire. Have something to eat and tell me where you have been these many weeks.”

Aunt Ethel sat in silence, spellbound as Jimmy recounted, between mouthfuls of cake and milk, his many adventures. Only when he had finished his story did she speak. “In your new world with new friends, you’ve found the happiness you searched for. It shows in the sparkle of your eyes. I am happy too, Jimmy, now that I know you are safe and well. However, before you return to your friends, there is something I must tell you.”

Now it was Jimmy’s turn to sit in silence as Aunt Ethel related an even stranger story.

She told Jimmy that he did not belong, even to this world. His mother and father had come from a world beyond the most distant planet. They arrived in a starship many years ago when Jimmy was but a baby. Aunt Ethel had been walking in the forest when their starship landed. She was the first person they met and, of course, Aunt Ethel being the sort of person she was, she invited them home for tea. In a short time, they had become great friends and they often visited her during the following months while they explored the planet Earth.

Sometime later, Jimmy’s parents were taken ill and Aunt Ethel cared for them as best she could, but not even the doctors could help to halt the unknown disease which

had struck them down. Before they died, they asked her to look after their baby boy, Jimmy McGellan. Being the kind-hearted person that she was, Aunt Ethel promised to care for Jimmy for as long as he needed her.

“And did mother and father look like me?” asked Jimmy.

“You have the same red shock of hair as your father,” replied Aunt Ethel, “and the same blue eyes and turned up nose as your mother. They told me that everyone in your world has pointed ears, and don’t worry about those feet of yours. They won’t grow any bigger. They’re just waiting for the rest of you to catch them up. But now that you know the truth, there is one more thing I must do. Your parents left a message for you in the starship. I promised to show you where it was hidden as soon as you were old enough to understand, and surely that day is now.”

Aunt Ethel led Jimmy down the lane and back into the forest. Past the circle of crooked oak trees, they walked even deeper into the dense undergrowth.

Jimmy would have walked straight past, had not Aunt Ethel caught his arm and said, “Stop, Jimmy! This is the place.”

She moved aside the branches of the closely packed foliage and there, hidden in a leafy dell, Jimmy saw the bright metal hull of the doughnut-shaped starship. Aunt Ethel fumbled for a hidden switch on the side of the ship. Slowly, with a whine, a door leaned out and reached down to the ground. On the back of the door, there were steps which led up into the hollow shell of the doughnut. Jimmy’s Aunt knew exactly what to do and she guided him directly to the control cabin. She pressed a button and a television monitor lit up. It played a recording of Jimmy’s mother and father, and they

explained in greater detail about who and of what, where and how, they had all come to this point.

Captain McGellan and his wife Serina were peaceful ambassadors from a distant galaxy, searching the heavens for signs of intelligent life. They were hoping to find advanced civilisations that they could learn from to increase their knowledge base.

In the star world of Attalia, where Jimmy was born, all men and boys have bright red hair. All females have shiny silver hair. Everyone on Attalia has pointed but rather special ears. When twitched in a certain way, they gave the power to hear the faintest of sounds—even the swish of gently falling snowflakes, even the breath of a breeze that tugs at the clouds, even the fall of a feather several miles away.

All Attalians wear calf-length red boots, but not just ordinary boots. These boots can carry their wearers further and faster than even a cheetah can run. But there are only two sizes of boots - large for men and small for women. And that's how it came to be that Attalian children had such large feet so that they could wear the boots from the day they could walk. Jimmy's feet were already fully grown, and that's why they looked so enormous on such a small boy.

Even better news was that there was just such a pair of red boots safely stored in a locker, waiting for Jimmy to collect them and, of course, when he tried them on, they were a perfect fit. The message from Jimmy's parents ended by explaining that he could return to Attalia any time he wished just by pressing a few buttons on the starship's control console.

After a long silence, Jimmy turned to his Aunt and said, "But I don't want to go back to Attalia. I would rather stay with my friends in Roombelow."

"You must do whatever you think is best," she said. "Roombelow is certainly where your new friends are. If that's where you are happiest then that's where you should stay. Perhaps one day, when you're older, you'll want to find out more about Attalia. When that day arrives, do come to see me before you go. Your starship will still be here, waiting, until the day you're ready."

Carefully they locked up the starship and again covered it with leafy branches. They retraced their steps until they reached the edge of the forest. Then Aunt Ethel turned and said, "You have come far enough. Now you must return to Roombelow. Come back to see me from time to time, just to let me know that all is well."

With that, she kissed Jimmy lightly on his cheek, turned and walked slowly away.

Alone but happy, Jimmy knew that whenever he returned Aunt Ethel would have a glass of creamy milk, a box of biscuits and a sultana and cherry cake ready and waiting for him. Wearing his bright red, Attalian boots, it only took a few minutes for Jimmy to speed back to Roombelow.

Matilda was overjoyed when he proudly presented her with the black toadstools he had collected. She chose three of the largest and added them to the boiling brew of bats' wings, frogs' legs, spiders' eyes, hedgehog's toenails and melted snow. While the cauldron bubbled, Matilda and Gemma sat spellbound as Jimmy told them about the starship from Attalia and the video message his mother and father had recorded. That took some explaining because neither Matilda nor Gemma had ever seen a television.

He showed his friends the bright new boots on his feet.

“Can I try them on?” asked Gemma.

“Of course, you can,” replied Jimmy. He took off his Attalian boots and Gemma tried to get the enormous boots on her tiny feet. Hopping around on one leg and bumping into furniture, her efforts were quite hilarious. Eventually, she succeeded and then discovered that the boots were too large for her to even lift his feet, let alone walk. “They don’t seem to work for me,” she said sadly.

“Don’t be surprised,” chided Matilda. “Those are very special boots, and they only work if you happen to come from Attalia.”

Jimmy twitched his ears and, slowly, his eyes widened in amazement. He told them, “I can hear the beat of birds’ wings as they flap their way home through the clouds. I can hear the sound of snowflakes gently falling onto the tops of the distant mountains.”

Matilda walked over to the window and looked up into the sky. She could hardly believe what she saw. A flock of starlings high among the clouds was winging home to roost. And the dark clouds over the tops of the mountains were spreading a white blanket of snow. “That is uncanny, Jimmy,” she said.

“Oh! There is something else,” said Jimmy. “It sounds as if your brew is boiling over.”

“Good gracious me!” exclaimed Matilda, and she dashed over to remove the cauldron from the fire. “I was so interested in your story that I quite forgot about my potion.” As she spoke, she took a ladle and poured some of the foul-smelling brew

into a goblet. Raising it to her lips and nipping her nose, she drained it to the last steaming hot drop. “Ah!” she sighed, “I’m feeling better already. Another dose at bedtime and, come tomorrow, I’ll be my usual self again.”

As night drew near, it was a happy pair that bid Matilda, “Goodnight!” Jimmy and Gemma set off down the hill toward the town. Gemma stayed in the mayor’s large house that night. Well! She wanted to hear the story again as Jimmy repeated the account of the day’s events to Mr McDonald and Amanda. Later, after supper, when Mr McDonald tucked the two friends comfortably into their beds and ruffled Jimmy’s red shock of hair, he saw a big fat tear roll down the mayor’s cheek, just before he put out the light.

“You could have returned to your people in Attalia,” he said, with a quiver in his voice. “But instead, you have decided to stay with us in Roombelow. You have made me very happy, Jimmy. Welcome home!”

Chapter 12

THE TROLLS

The next few weeks flew by and the season began to change. Although snow was falling heavily on the mountain tops, the air was still quite mild down in the valleys. Winter in Roombelow was never too cold. The Northwind never blew its icy blasts down that particular valley.

The shepherds bring their flocks of sheep down from the freezing mountain slopes to graze in the evergreen fields around the town. They will not return to the peaks until the warm spring sunshine melts away the snow to reveal again the newly sprouted, sweet, mountain grass.

One afternoon the two friends, Jimmy and Gemma, were sat together on the wall around the well, chatting about nothing in particular, when a frightened shepherd came dashing into the town square.

“Where’s the Mayor?” he shouted. “Mr McDonald, come quickly!”

A crowd soon gathered around the frantic shepherd and

Mr McDonald had to push his way through the throng.

“Whatever is all this commotion about?” asked Mr McDonald. He was rather cross that his early afternoon nap had been disturbed by the uproar. “I bring the most terrible news,” garbled the shepherd. “The whole town is in danger. Terrible danger. Oh, dear! Oh, dear!”

“Calm down,” commanded Mr McDonald in his most Mayor-like voice. “Tell me slowly. What is it that threatens the town?”

The shepherd gathered his breath and explained nervously to the now hushed crowd. His flock of sheep had been attacked.

“Attacked!” gasped the crowd.

“By wolves?” asked Gemma.

“No!” said the shepherd. “By one-eyed trolls.”

“Trolls!” gasped the crowd.

“Trolls have never worried our sheep before,” said Mr McDonald. “They live in the caves near tops of the highest mountains. They never come down to the valleys.”

There was a moment’s silence and then Mr Trimitt spoke out loud the very thoughts they were all afraid of. “If the trolls have left their caves to eat our sheep, they may even come right into our valley and attack us.”

The crowd pleaded with their Mayor. “What can we do, Mr McDonald?”

“What can we do?” echoed Mr McDonald. “We have lived peacefully here in Roombelow for hundreds of years. I can’t remember when a sword or spear was last

used in anger. We have forgotten how to defend ourselves because we have never needed to.”

“Excuse me. There may be no need to fight,” said Jimmy softly. “Why not simply ask the trolls to go back to their caves?”

The shepherd laughed nervously. “No one has ever got near enough to a troll to ask it anything. They are the most terrifying, grotesque creatures anyone has ever seen. They are certain to attack if you get too close.”

Jimmy continued, unabashed. “If I wear my Attalian boots, they may not be able to catch me. With Matilda’s magic ring, I can talk to them and, if they won’t listen, then I’ll escape before they have time to attack.”

He had made up his mind and not even his friends’ pleadings could make him change his plans.

Gemma was very disappointed that, yet again, she could not accompany her friend on his next adventure.

Jimmy began what was probably his most dangerous journey since he arrived in Roombelow all those months ago. With Matilda’s magic ring on his little finger and the Attalian boots on his feet, Jimmy quickly reached the foothills of the mountains. He stopped, twitched his pointed ears, and listened. Certainly, he could hear the snowflakes falling further up the mountain. Much closer could be heard the howling of wolves. From even further in the distance came the grunts and groans of what could only be - the trolls.

Jimmy travelled cautiously now. Slower. Listening after each upward step. He did not wish to bump unawares into a wolf or a troll. The wolves were howling somewhere to his right, quite close by. He made a wide detour to avoid them, for when wolves are hungry they can be very dangerous animals. Quietly, he crept past the pack of wolves and began to tread even more carefully. The shepherd had warned him not to startle a troll for it would surely attack if disturbed.

Slowly, from rock to rock, he made his way further up the mountainside, taking great care not to disturb any loose pebbles that might clatter down the slopes. The slightest noise would surely warn the trolls that a stranger was approaching.

Jimmy stopped and listened intently. He could hear something moving, just ahead. Ever so slowly, he raised his head to peep over the top of a large boulder, and there in front of him was a whole family of very large, very hairy, one-eyed trolls.

The trolls were finishing off a rather gruesome meal. All that remained of a large sheep were the bones, horns, and its woollen coat neatly stretched out over a nearby rock.

The trolls were unlike anything that Jimmy had ever seen. The adults were almost two and a half metres tall. The whole of their bodies was covered with long, silver-grey hair, as were their long, ape-like arms. Sharp, pointed teeth protruded from their gaping mouths, and they peered through a single, evil-looking eye in the centre of their foreheads.

Jimmy watched, fearful and fascinated, as the creatures finished crunching the remaining sheep bones. The baby trolls then curled up ready for sleep. The bigger trolls lolled about in the snow, not seeming to feel the icy cold.

At long last, Jimmy decided not to run away, as well he might have done. With heart-pounding, he stepped out from behind the rocks, right into the centre of the circle of resting trolls.

Turning to the biggest troll, who Jimmy thought must be their chief, he said in his bravest deepest, voice, "Hello! Mr Troll. I'm from Roombelow and I have come to ask why you are killing our sheep?"

The trolls were visibly amazed that such a small man-child had dared to enter their family circle. They exchanged surprised looks among themselves, but they did not attack. Perhaps they were too full after just finishing their meal.

The largest troll, to whom Jimmy had spoken, rolled over to look more closely at the tiny intruder. There was a long pause and, with a single eye, he examined Jimmy from head to toe.

"WHO - ARE - YOU?" he boomed in his deep, growling voice. The sudden noise startled Jimmy and he almost took to his heels in panic. Perhaps it was fear that rooted him to the spot, but he quelled his fear and made his reply to the glowering troll.

"I'm Jimmy and I've come from the town of Roombelow to find out why you have left your caves and why you are eating our sheep."

The chief troll answered, "We left our homes in the caves because we had to find food, and these sheep are certainly the best food we've tasted for many months."

"But you cannot eat these sheep," complained Jimmy. "They are not yours to do with as you like."

The chief troll did not like being told what he could or could not do and he became a very enraged troll. He slowly lumbered to his feet and roared. "No one tells a troll what to do. We take whatever we need, whenever we need it. When we are hungry, we take whatever food we find." The other trolls snarled their agreement.

"Oh, dear! I am sorry to have upset you," trembled Jimmy. "Please don't be angry. I mean you no harm."

Erg, the Chief troll erupted in laughter. "Harm? *You*? Harm us? Why that is the funniest thing I've ever heard."

The other trolls bellowed their laughter through the cold morning air.

The tiny figure of Jimmy Crikey was dwarfed by their giant of a chief and Erg had to admire the courage of this small figure who had dared to approach his tribe of terrible trolls.

Kindlier now, he said, "Come, man-boy. Sit beside me and I will tell why we are so far from our homes."

When Jimmy was as comfortable as he could be on the freezing rock seat he had chosen to perch on, Erg continued:

"We trolls have lived for so long in the frozen snows of the mountain peaks that our bodies have grown long hairy coats to protect us from the cold. Because we have no enemies, we fear no danger, and one eye is all we need. Normally we would eat wolves, wild goats and the occasional rabbit, but the unusually bitter cold of this winter has driven the animals further and further down the mountain. We followed the wolves and then discovered that sheep make an even tastier meal."

Jimmy interrupted Erg, "Then perhaps, if the weather was not so cold, the goats and wolves would return to the peaks and the trolls would return to their caves."

"NOT SO!" boomed Erg. "We have no intention of going back. Sheep are much easier to catch than goats and wolves, and they do taste good."

There was a long silence and Jimmy thought hard about how he could break this deadlock. Quickly he formed a plan.

"Erg," said Jimmy, very seriously, "if the trolls continue to eat sheep, they will very soon need two eyes."

Erg replied, "One eye is quite sufficient for a troll with no enemies."

"That may be true at this moment," said Jimmy, "but if you do not leave our sheep alone, then my people will become your most feared enemies."

"WHAT!" roared Erg. "Tiny mites like yourself. Why I could gobble you up in the twinkling of an eye."

"You would have to catch me first," shouted Jimmy and he danced away through the snow in his Attalian boots, just beyond the reach of the enraged troll's outstretched hands.

Then began the wildest chase anyone had ever seen. Erg blustered, roared and floundered in the snow. Jimmy's dancing, flashing feet kept him just out of range of Erg's grasping hands. After half an hour, Erg was puffing and panting, the steam was streaming from his hot hairy body into the icy air, while Jimmy was as fresh as when the chase began.

Erg paused to catch his breath and Jimmy pleaded, "Oh! do give up, Erg. You'll never catch me."

"All right! All right!" panted Erg and he sank exhausted into the trampled snow.

"Remember this," Jimmy warned. "If Roombelow's army comes after the trolls, they will carry spears, darts and arrows. The army will come to kill, not to talk, as I did."

"Just tell us what we can do," pleaded Erg. "We cannot return to our caves until this bitter winter is over. We would perish without food."

Jimmy made a solemn promise that, if Erg would take the trolls back to their mountaintop caves, he would make sure the wolves and goats could return to the tops of the mountainsides.

The trolls gathered and huddled together, tongues a-wagging, heads a-nodding. They agreed with the counsel of Erg. Trolls would never withstand an attack by an army that moved like flashing shadows. "We could never win a battle against such an enemy." Erg turned back to Jimmy. "It is agreed," he said, reluctantly.

"You can start your journey now," said Jimmy, greatly relieved that his ruse had worked. "By the time you arrive back at your caves, the snow will have stopped falling, the freezing air will be warmer and the goats and wolves will soon return to the uppermost mountain slopes."

Jimmy began his climb ahead of the trolls. He threw caution to the wind and moved as quickly as his feet would carry him. He did not stop his upward flight until

he reached the same summit peak from where he had begun his search for the Weather Man many weeks before.

There was no sign of the Great White Owl, but on this occasion, Jimmy did not need the magical stardust to carry him over the cloud tops. The red boots from Attalia would skim him over the snow-laden clouds. There remained one problem. How could he find the Weather Man's solitary white cloud when the whole sky was filled with hundreds of billowing snow clouds?

Again, Jimmy put to use his newfound powers. He twitched his pointed ears and listened intently. He searched for the sound he knew he would hear. At last, clearly and distinctly, he heard the contented snores. Just as he had guessed. The Weather Man was fast asleep again.

With the assistance of his Attalian boots it only took take a few cloud-topping steps to find the right cloud. Down the ladder, he climbed through the hole in the cloud, into the weather control cabin decked with multicoloured knobs and dials and switches. From behind a drawn curtain came the drifting snores. Dead to the world's weather lay the ancient Weather Man, sleeping peacefully.

Gently Jimmy awakened him. Quietly he chided the old man of the skies. Yet again, the Weather Man had fallen asleep and this time he had left the weather controls in the ice-cold position. He reset the controls and turned apologetically to Jimmy. "Sorry Jimmy," he said. "I'll have to start using a reliable alarm clock - can't keep falling asleep on the job."

"What you need," suggested Jimmy, "is a young assistant. Then you could take it, in turns, to tend the weather while the other rests."

“What a good idea!” said Weather Man. “The next time I pass the land of the Fairies I’ll pick up an apprentice pixie. One nice little fellow I know is just waiting for the opportunity to be invited aboard. He’ll gladly join me on my journeys through the skies.”

“Sorry I can’t stay any longer,” said Jimmy. “I promised to meet Erg, the chief troll, back at the caves.”

“Let me drop you off on my way,” offered the Weather Man.

“Not this time, my friend. I have to hurry,” said Jimmy, climbing back up the ladder. “Goodbye,” he shouted as he leapt onto the next cloud, and the next, and the next, until he arrived back at the top of the third mountain on the left.

He reached the caves just as Erg and the trolls ended their climb up the mountain. Erg greeted him like a long-lost friend and hugged him to his hairy chest until Jimmy, wheezing, pleaded, “All right, Erg, all right!”

Erg gently put Jimmy down. “You kept your promise and I’ll keep mine,” he boomed to Jimmy. “The wolves are already returning to their dens among the rocks, and the goats are climbing up the cliffside paths. You need have no further fear for the safety of your sheep. As long as your fleet-footed army never attacks us, armed with spears and darts, we give you our promise never to eat another sheep.”

“Rest assured,” said Jimmy. “Our army will not attack you unless you give them a reason. You’re safe as long as our sheep are safe.”

They bade farewell and Jimmy set off down the slopes homeward bound, yet another mission successfully completed.

Chapter 13

LOST

Back in Roombelow, Mr McDonald and Amanda, Matilda and Gemma and the rest of Jimmy's friends had started to get worried. The shadows were lengthening, night was approaching and still, there was no sign of Jimmy returning. As darkness deepened, one by one, families drifted away from the town square off to their own homes. Tired children had late suppers before they were tucked up in bed for the night. Lamps burned late as the worried townsfolk folk waited for news. But none came.

A silent trio remained by the well with oil lamps resting on its wall. Mr McDonald paced back and forth; Matilda peered into the gloom; Gemma sat on the wall with chin resting on knees; moths darted around the glowing lamps. The town hall clock struck twice and bats flitted in and out of the belfry.

Amanda broke the silence and called to them from her open doorway. "Come on in, Malcolm," for that was Mr McDonald's first name. "And you, Matilda. There's no point in waiting any longer. Look at Gemma. She's fallen asleep. Let's get her to bed, and then we'll have a warm drink. Leave the lamps burning. If Jimmy is lost, the light might guide him home."

“I do hope he’s all right,” Matilda said worriedly.

As soon as Gemma was in bed, they drew up their chairs in front of the window, watching and waiting for Jimmy. But he did not return, and the long wait made them weary. First one, then the other dozed off, still sitting in their chairs in front of the window.

Early morning sunshine woke them and, rubbing their eyes and stiff limbs, they staggered into the square. Matilda turned down the wicks and extinguished the lamps and Mr McDonald wandered along the road leading out of town. He returned in a few minutes with shoulders hunched and head hanging.

“Nothing?” asked Matilda.

“Nothing,” said Mr McDonald.

Back in the house, Amanda cooked breakfast, but even Gemma couldn’t eat more than a mouthful. They were too concerned for Jimmy.

“If only we knew he was safe,” said Matilda.

“Of course he’s safe,” piped Gemma. “It’s just that he’s been delayed. Jimmy is far too clever to allow a troll to get the better of him.”

Mr McDonald said, “I’m sure you’re right, Gemma, but we can’t just sit here doing nothing, not knowing where he is. We’ll organise a search as soon as the town wakes up.”

“I won’t join the search,” said Matilda, “I’ll use my crystal ball to contact my sister witches. They may be able to help.”

Their plans took shape. Mr McDonald organised the menfolk and split them up into six search parties, each with a horn to be blown only if they found Jimmy. Each group went off in a different direction. The Mayor and Amanda stayed in Roombelow in case Jimmy should return home. Matilda and Gemma trudged up the hill to the witch's house, hoping to uncover some magical method of tracing their missing friend.

Matilda enlisted the aid of her sisters, through the crystal ball. The search parties spread out through the hills, searching behind every rock, peering into every nook and cranny, calling all the while for Jimmy. By the time the sun was high in the sky, there was still no trace of him to be found. Matilda, meanwhile, had spoken to her sister witches and they were all trying to locate Jimmy. Ira had the power to search from the sky. She floated beneath the clouds, scanning the ground for miles around, but she could not find Jimmy. Ellwin was a water sprite, who wafted over the water in every stream, lake and river, but she could not find Jimmy. Floella was the spirit of the earth and she searched every burrow, cave, tunnel and hole, but she could not find Jimmy. One by one, the sisters reported their sad news back to Matilda. There was no sign of Jimmy anywhere. Gemma was heartbroken and Matilda tried to console her.

"Don't be so sad," she said. "He can't have disappeared without leaving some trace. He has to be somewhere."

"But where?" moaned Gemma. "He wouldn't leave us without saying goodbye. Unless ... No! Matilda, he can't be *dead*?"

"No! No!" Matilda reassured her. "Jimmy can easily outrun wolves and trolls."

“But what if he tripped and fell?” asked Gemma. There was a momentary silence. Gemma recovered from the horrible thoughts which rushed in. “Matilda we must find out if the trolls have ... have eaten him.”

“How can we do that?” Matilda asked. “First we must find them, then we have to get close to them, and who will ask a troll what it had for supper last night?”

“I will,” offered Gemma. “Loan me your magic ring.”

“I can’t. Jimmy took the ring with him.”

“What about your witch friends? Do any of them have a ring like yours?”

Matilda shook her head sadly. “There is only one ring like that in the whole world, and Jimmy has it with him. However ... Gemma, perhaps I can concoct a spell.”

Hope glimmered in Gemma’s eyes, and Matilda searched through her ancient, dust-covered spellbooks. Some had never been opened for years. Some may have never have been opened at all.

Gemma made tea continuously all afternoon and tried to help Matilda with her search, but many of the books were written in a strange language she couldn’t understand, so she made herself useful by passing book after book down from the cobweb-covered shelves. Showers of dust clogged her nose. Standing on the empty shelves, she reached up still higher for more. What her outstretched fingers touched and dislodged were not books but rolls and rolls of long-forgotten scrolls - parchments rolled up in tubes and tied with tape. The whole lot rolled off the shelf, shedding years of accumulated dust which rose in clouds and filled the room.

Sneezing, coughing and spluttering, Gemma and Matilda had to run outside to gather their breath. When they had recovered and their eyes had stopped streaming, they could see the search parties returning to the town. "It doesn't look as if they have found him," said Gemma.

"Well then, now it's up to us. Come on! Back to the spells."

The dust cloud had almost settled, but what a mess was left behind. Scrolls and books lay all over the room, and everything was covered with a fine coating of dust. Gemma began to stack the scrolls onto the table and Matilda resumed her search. She had just sat down when she suddenly jumped up. "Here it is," she shouted. "Here it is."

"A spell to talk to trolls?" asked Gemma.

"No!" she said. "A spell to find misplaced things."

"Like Jimmy?"

"No. Not people. Things. Things like lost spells. Stand aside Gemma, I'll give it a try." Reading from the open scroll Matilda chanted the long-forgotten spell. "Towso, Towso, Master-ando, Shevil, Shevil, Shevil."

The words were hardly past her lips before a dark brown scroll unrolled itself and floated into her open hand. Urgently she read the ancient text and, with Gemma watching her every move, she began to mix ingredients into a goblet.

Within five minutes, the spell for animal-speak was prepared.

"Now what?" she asked Gemma.

“Give it to me and I’ll be off to see the trolls,” she said.

“Not so fast, Gemma. It will soon be dark and it will be even more dangerous trying to track the trolls by night. You must wait until morning.”

“I’ll wait no longer,” Gemma said. She grabbed the goblet and drank the potion before Matilda could stop her. “Gemma, what have you done?” she wailed. “The spell will only last for a few hours.”

“Then I must set off now,” replied Gemma. “But not without your magic spectacles, Matilda.”

“Magic spectacles?”

“Yes! Jimmy and I found them while we were looking through your cupboards and drawers weeks and weeks ago. When you put them on, darkness turns to light. ”

“Of course, I’d quite forgotten about them.” She rummaged a while then shook her head. “It’s no good. I can’t find them. Can you?”

Gemma couldn’t find them either. Then Matilda remembered - the spell she had used just a few moments before would find them.

“Towso, Towso, Master-ando, Shevil, Shevil, Shevil.”

The old horn-rimmed spectacles floated out of a half-opened drawer and into her outstretched hand.

“Here you are, Gemma. Go if you must, but please take care. We don’t want to lose you too. I’ll let Mr McDonald know what you’re doing, and we’ll wait together in his home for your return. Bring us news as soon as you can.”

Gemma blushed crimson when Matilda kissed her lightly on her cheek, then, quickly, she set off for the mountains, in search of the trolls and Jimmy.

Chapter 14

THE SEARCH

Charlie Raven told Gemma where to find the trolls and she was halfway up their mountain as darkness fell. It was cold and dark and Gemma had left Roombelow in such a hurry that she had forgotten to put on an overcoat. She almost dropped the magic spectacles because she was shivering so much, but she managed to get them looped over her ears. Then at least she could see clearly, as if night had turned to day.

The night disappeared and Gemma continued her upward climb. The higher she climbed the colder the air became. Snow was falling and the air was freezing. Gemma didn't even know that she had stumbled right into a troll's cave until massive, hairy arms lifted her from the ground.

"Not another human cub," boomed Erg. But Gemma was too cold to care and was past all fear. "But this one is more dead than alive, and she's even smaller than the last one," Erg remembered Jimmy's promise that they would be left in peace.

"She carries no weapons. Let's try to rub some life into her. Then we'll find out what she wants."

They laid Gemma down on a sheepskin and carefully massaged her, rubbing her arms and legs until her blood warmed up and her eyes flickered open. Gemma swallowed hard when he saw the great troll Erg, and, with great difficulty, she quelled her panic. It was time to test the effectiveness of Matilda's animal speak spell.

"What have you done with Jimmy?" she asked, nervously.

"We haven't done anything with Jimmy," retorted Erg. "He left us yesterday, late in the afternoon, and headed home."

"Well he never arrived," Gemma said, "and we thought, er, er, we thought that you ... Oh, dear! We thought that you might have eaten him," she gulped.

Erg shook his massive head. "Eat *Jimmy*? But he's our friend, and anyway, we couldn't catch him, even if we'd wanted to." The other trolls in the cave nodded in agreement. "If something has happened to Jimmy, we've had nothing to do with it."

Although the news was good, Gemma was even more depressed. "There's just no trace of him anywhere. I'll have to keep on looking. I won't stop until I know what has happened to him." Erg made Gemma stay awhile until she had fully recovered, and then allowed her to head back down the mountain with a sheepskin wrapped around her shoulders, like a cape, to help keep out the cold.

On the lower slopes of the mountains, Gemma asked every night-time animal she met if anyone had seen her friend Jimmy - the owl, the fox, the hedgehog. None had seen Jimmy. Then she spotted a family of badgers playing around just outside of their set entrance.

Cautiously, so as not to startle them, she approached one step at a time. Gently she asked, "Please Mr and Mrs Badger, I'm looking for a friend who is missing. Can you help me?"

The badgers, being rather timid creatures, had cautiously backed away into their set.

"It's another human who speaks badger talk. I've never known such things," whispered Mr Badger to Mrs Badger.

Gemma heard them. "Then you must have seen Jimmy. Please tell me, when? Where?"

"Just last evening," said Mrs Badger. "We had just woken up and were stretching our legs when along came this human. Running like the wind, he was. Almost trod on one of our cubs. Well, I gave him what for, the way he was dashing about the countryside, like a whirlwind."

"Let's not worry about that, dear. He did apologise and he was rather in a hurry to get back home before nightfall. Anyway, it's just as well he stopped. Might never have heard that cry for help if he hadn't."

Gemma was delighted. Jimmy was alive and well last night. "What happened? Where did he go?"

Mrs Badger took up the tale again. "Swore he heard a cry for help, he did. Couldn't hear a thing myself. Never known a man with better ears than a badger."

“Then he set off that way,” interrupted Mr Badger, pointing out the direction. “Running faster than a hare. Saw him disappear over that hill, and that’s the last we’ve seen of him.”

“Oh!” was all that Gemma could say for the moment, but she soon recovered. “Thanks very much, Mr Badger, and you too, Mrs Badger. I’d better be on my way after him.”

“Off you go then,” said Mrs Badger. “Hope you find him.” She turned to her cubs. “May as well stay in the set now. It’ll soon be light. Almost bedtime now”.

Her constant chattering faded into the distance as Gemma set off in the direction Mr Badger had pointed. Fear and dread were replaced by hope and determination, and there was a spring in Gemma’s steps, even as she climbed the next hill.

Gemma ran, trotted and tracked, down valleys, up hills, around lakes and across rivers. The sky glowed a gentle shade of gold, heralding the start of a new day, and Gemma kept on going in as near a straight line as she could.

The last bird she spoke to, a crow, didn’t understand Gemma’s questions but simply skipped away and ignored her. Matilda’s animal-speak spell had worn off. She took off the magical, horn-rimmed spectacles and put them in her pocket, glad of the morning sun. She paused to scoop water from the stream into her parched mouth. Refreshed, she set off again. Shortly after, she noticed something most peculiar. The morning mist was clearing but barring the path was a solid wall of rock. A vertical cliff face stretched upward and in each direction, left and right as far as the eye could see. Gemma was rooted to the spot. Several minutes passed while she gazed dumbly at the very end of the underground world.

Gradually her mind began to work again. "If this is the edge of the world, where has Jimmy gone?" she muttered to herself. She shouted out, almost in a panic, "Jimmy! Jimmy!" The echoes crashed back off the cliff. "Jimmeeee, Jimmeeee, Jimmeeee, Jimmeeee." When the last echo faded away, the silence seemed to scream at Gemma. The stresses and strains were all too much for the little lady, and she sat down and cried and cried, as though her heart would break. She was so exhausted that she cried herself to sleep.

Gemma dozed fitfully. It was not a restful sleep and nightmares haunted her. She dreamed that Jimmy was being torn limb from limb by an ogre, and Gemma could only watch helplessly, screaming, "Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy!"

Then a voice broke into the nightmare and said, "Gemma, wake up! Wake up!" Strong hands gently shook his shoulders. "Gemma, it's me, I'm here. Don't be afraid."

Gemma's eyes opened, wide with disbelief.

"Is it really you, Jimmy?"

"Of course, it's me. You've just had a bad dream, but it's over now."

Gemma hugged and hugged and hugged him, until Jimmy said, "I don't know about you, Gemma, but the quicker we get home the better. Amanda and Mr McDonald must be worried out of their minds. I didn't mean to be away so long."

"He's not the only one who's worried. The whole town has been out searching for you. Even Matilda and her sisters, with all their powers, could find no trace of you," explained Gemma.

“I’m sorry to have caused all this trouble, but I’m sure you’ll all forgive me when you hear my story. Not just yet, though. Let’s get back to Roombelow as quickly as we can.”

Jimmy hoisted Gemma onto his back, piggy-back style, and began the return journey at a quick trot. His red Attalian boots skimmed effortlessly over the ground and didn’t stop until they were standing by the well in the centre of the town square in Roombelow. Mr McDonald blew a long blast on his horn to call in the rescue groups and to let them know Jimmy was found. They were soon surrounded by a happy crowd, and there were no happier faces than those of Mr McDonald, Amanda, and Matilda.

It took a long while for all their friends to welcome Jimmy and Gemma back, each of the townsfolk wanting to shake the hands of the weary pair. Eventually, the crowd dispersed, happy that the threat from the Trolls had been neutralised, and Mr McDonald took Jimmy, Gemma and Matilda into his home where they all sat down to eat a bumper brunch of sausage, egg, bacon and chips cooked by Amanda.

Chapter 15

DIAMONITES

After lunch, surrounded by his Roombelow family, Jimmy told his story: how he had persuaded Erg to return to the mountain-top caves with his tribe of Trolls; how he was running back home and almost stepped on one of Mrs Badger's cubs; how he then heard a distant cry for help; how he ran like the wind to the bottom of the cliff face.

"That was where I followed you to," interrupted Gemma. "But where did you go after that?"

Jimmy went on. "The cry for help came from high up the cliff wall. I climbed up the rock face until I came to the opening of a cave. There I found a very frightened little boy, huddled in a corner, sobbing."

The boy, Tony, had been playing with his dog in the forest. Daisy, Tony's dog, had then fallen into a deep hole and couldn't scramble out. Tony climbed down to rescue him but then Daisy had run away, scared, into the honeycombs of tunnels, which dove deeper and deeper under the ground. Tony searched but was unable to find Daisy. Eventually, he emerged into the light at the mouth of the cave, high up in the cliff wall. He was hopelessly lost and began to call for help. He was very lucky that

Jimmy had heard his cry. Within minutes, Jimmy was standing beside Tony, listening to his tale of woe.

Then together they went in search of the missing Daisy. Fortunately, Jimmy was wearing Matilda's ring. That, of course, meant that he could talk to the animals if there were any animals in the cold, dark tunnels and caves. As it was, he did find animals, but they did not appreciate being awakened from their upside-down slumber. Their twittering chatter sounded quite cross, but the bats did offer their help and very quickly located the missing Daisy.

When Tony had his frightened pet safely in his arms, Jimmy disturbed the bats again. Although still quite disgruntled, the bats guided Jimmy and Tony through the tunnels which led back to the surface. Once Tony and Daisy were safely above ground, Jimmy made him promise to fill in the hole with twigs and branches. He didn't want anyone else stumbling down the hole to get lost in the complex of underground tunnels.

Gemma interrupted Jimmy again. "It must have taken you hours and hours to find Daisy."

"No, it didn't, Gemma. It only took a few minutes."

"But you've been missing a whole day and a night," Matilda said. "Couldn't you find your way back?"

"I'm coming to that," Jimmy said with a smile. Then he turned to Gemma. "Where did you live before you came to the well?"

“I don’t know,” Gemma replied, very much surprised at the question. “It seems that I’ve always lived at the bottom of the well.”

Matilda agreed. “Gemma has been there for so long, it seems as if she has always lived there. What is this leading up to, Jimmy?”

Jimmy continued. “Gemma may have lived down in the well for a long time, but has no one thought of where she came from?” Silence ... “Well, I believe I have discovered how she got there. Surprisingly, no one has ever wondered why Gemma should be so different, and so small, compared to the rest of the people in Roombelow.”

Gemma’s eyes glowed with excitement. “Come on, Jimmy. Don’t keep me in suspense. Tell us what you know.”

“Tell us what you have discovered,” pleaded Amanda. And Jimmy did.

Returning through the maze of tunnels after rescuing Tony, Jimmy’s sharp hearing detected the sound of voices. Following the sounds, which echoed along the tunnels, he traced the source of the voices. A small group of little people was gathered in an enormous cavern, lit by glowing crystals which were embedded in the walls. The walls of the cavern were encrusted with bright shimmering, diamond-like crystals, which shone almost as brightly as daylight. It was these same crystals that had screened Jimmy from Witch Floella’s view when she had searched for him. Running off from the main cavern were hundreds of smaller caves, each one housing a family of little people.

When Jimmy walked into the sparkling light, they showed no fear, even though he towered, head and shoulders, over them. They were friendly and curious. They wanted to know who he was, where he was from, how he got there, and lots more. Jimmy patiently answered all their questions, but all the while his mind was reeling. The little people were identical in appearance to his friend Gemma. As soon as the opportunity arose, he told them about the little lady who lived in a cave, at the bottom of a well, in the town square in Roombelow.

The little people, or Diamonites, as they were known, were amazed and overjoyed. Yes! Many years ago there had been a small Diamonite girl who was very inquisitive. She wanted to know where all the tunnels in Lithania led to. She spent most of her spare time exploring the labyrinths, but one day she disappeared when her tiny boat failed to return from a voyage on one of the multitudes of rivers running through the caves. Many of the rivers ended when they fell thunderously into apparently bottomless chasms and gorges.

Jimmy went on with his story. "And that small, adventurous girl has grown up to be *you*, Gemma. The waterfalls from the world of the Diamonites must flow into Roombelow's underground rivers and streams. Your boat must have been carried over the falls and then was swept along by the current until you arrived at the bottom of the well in Roombelow. It seems that when you were swept over the waterfall, you probably hit your head on a rock. That could explain your loss of memory. But, there can be no doubt that the Diamonites are your people, Gemma, and Lithania is the land you swept away from."

"But where is Lithania?" Gemma asked.

“As soon as I can I’ll take you back to Lithania to meet your own family of people.”

Mr McDonald’s house was filled with the sounds of celebration and laughter that night. It seemed that fate had brought these two young people together. They were from very different worlds. Gemma had set out to explore; Jimmy had set out to search for happiness. It was surely not just chance that they should come together and become the closest of friends in the town of Roombelow, the happiest town in, or should we say, *under* the world.

Part 2 – Lithania

Chapter 16

Gemma's Journey Home

Gemma could hardly contain her excitement. She was almost bouncing up and down in front of her best friend. This was the day Jimmy was taking her on a journey to meet her people at the end of the underground world. She was going back to visit the Diamites in the land of Lithania, the world she had been swept away from, so many years ago.

During his first visit to the complex of caves where the Diamites lived, in the cliff side world seemingly at the very end of the underground world, Jimmy had been told a story. Gemma was the little girl who had loved exploring the rivers and streams that flowed through their kingdom. She disappeared one day and despite days of searching, they could find no trace of her. It was thought that her canoe had been carried over one of the many waterfalls which fell to the very centre of the world. Eventually, they gave up the search believing she had met her end and would never be found.

Jimmy had met with the Elders of the Diamites, in a cave illuminated with the brilliant light emitted by the crystals of diamonite which lined all the walls in Lithania. He explained that she was alive and well, living happily in Roombelow in the small cave at the bottom of the well but with no memory of her previous

life. The Elders could not trace Gemma's parents but believed there was still a family who could be Gemma's relatives. The family name was Zapheer and they lived nearby. Jimmy promised to return with Gemma as soon as he could to meet whoever might remain in the Zapheer family.

That day had dawned and it was time for Gemma to say her thanks and goodbyes to the many friends she had made since arriving mysteriously in Roombelow. Jimmy told Mr McDonald he would be back home as soon as he fulfilled his promise to Gemma. He carried a low-slung backpack with emergency food and drink supplies. With Gemma hoisted high on his shoulders, legs hanging either side of his neck, Jimmy set off. It would take almost half the day to reach Lithania, even with the help of Jimmy's Attalian boots. They skimmed over the ground effortlessly covering the miles, always heading due west. It was early afternoon before their progress came to a halt at the base of the cliff which spread north and south as far as the eye could see. The cliff face stretched upward but the top was shrouded in mist.

"I can't see any sign of Lithania, Jimmy," said Gemma, looking around in amazement.

"Don't worry about that, Gemma. It's there alright; inside these very cliffs. But first, we have to find the entrance. It was around here that I first heard Tony's cries for help. Tony was the boy from the world above whose dog, Daisy, got lost chasing a rabbit down a hole. It was while I was searching for Daisy that I came across the Diamite people. As soon as I laid eyes on them I knew they were your people. They looked just like you."

"But how do we get in?"

“We’re looking for a small opening, about one-third of the way up. Keep scanning the cliff face. It’s very close to this spot.”

After only a few minutes of searching, Gemma spotted the dark opening in the cliffside. “There it is, Jimmy. But how on earth can we get up to it? It’s far too high.”

“Don’t you worry about that. I’ve climbed up to it before and I can do it again.”

“You may be able to but there’s no way I can even reach the first ledge,” said Gemma.

“You don’t have to, Gemma. I’ll climb to the ledge. Then I’ll lower the rope and pull you up. Once you’re safe we’ll do it in stages until we reach the entrance.”

And so, the fearful Gemma climbed up the sheer cliff face in stages until, at last, she rested on the lip of the entrance to the cave world of the Diamites.

Chapter 17

Gemma's Family

Once again, the bats were disturbed by Gemma and Jimmy's stumbling progress through the tunnels dimly lit by the soft glow emanating from the walls. However, Jimmy recalled the route he took on his last visit so it wasn't necessary to ask for their help. Which was just as well because he had not brought Matilda's animal-speak magic ring. As they walked deeper into the complex of tunnels and caves, the light got brighter and brighter. Crystals embedded in the stone walls glowed stronger with every step they took deeper into Lithania.

Just as they rounded the next corner, the roof of the tunnel soared higher than they could see and the light was almost as bright as on a sunny day. There were hundreds of steps cut into the stone walls and each flight led to a smaller cave from which there peered many small faces. These were family units. In the centre of the chamber were gathered a group of about ten adult Diamites. Each was as perfectly formed as Gemma and none were taller than her, none reaching higher than Jimmy's shoulder. The Diamites had been warned of their arrival by the flight of the disturbed bats.

The central figure in the group spoke up. "Welcome back, Jimmy, and our warmest welcome to Gemma. You've been missing from us for so long."

"Is my name really 'Gemma'?" She asked. "That's the only name that came to my mind when I was rescued from the bottom of the well in Roombelow. When

I was asked how I got there and how I'd got the lump on my head, I just could not remember anything else."

"My name is Zepher and I am the elected head of the Diamites. This here is Opella and she is my deputy." Opella stepped forward, with a low bow and a sweep of her arms. "I am so pleased to welcome you home, Gemma. Yes, that is your birth name and your family name is Zapheer. I know your brother and sister have been waiting to meet you with great anticipation, ever since Jimmy told us about you."

The Diamites were dressed in differing shades of green. Tunics hung to mid-thigh. Hose covered their legs and all wore short boots. The leader wore a bright, emerald sash and the others had sashes in the colours of the rainbow. The men all had short-cropped hair and the females' hair, hues of yellow to blond, hung to shoulder length. Most carried pointed hats folded and tucked into waist belts.

Gemma asked Opella to explain what they had discovered about her remaining Zapheer family. "We know your parents passed away several years ago, but you have two surviving older siblings. Your brother's name is Geldus and your sister is named Zeea. Both have life partners and families of their own. Geldus has two children, a boy, and a girl, and Zeea has one child, a little girl."

"So, I'm an aunty now," shrieked Gemma, with joy. "Where are they? When can I meet them? How old are they?"

"All I can tell you is that they are all well, but news of your return has not yet reached their ears, otherwise they would be here to greet you. Messengers have been sent to find them and to bring them here."

"It's so exciting, Jimmy. I just can't wait to meet them."

“Patience, Gemma. I’m sure you won’t have long to wait. Let’s go into the Great Hall and take some refreshments while we wait,” suggested Opella. She took hold of Gemma and guided her through a series of tunnels into a large, domed cavern offset from the main hallway. The central area was brightly lit and around the perimeter were long tables, stacked with food. Chairs were lined up against the walls. At the farthest end, there was a raised platform on which stood ten larger chairs with high backs. Jimmy and Gemma followed the lead of the other Diamites and each took a stone goblet and filled from a flagon with something that tasted like freshly squeezed fruit juice. There were also plates and bowls filled with what can only be described as ‘finger-food’.

As they drank, the other Diamites introduced themselves as council members. They met every day in the Great Hall to discuss the day to day problems that arose in almost all communities. Their decisions were mutually agreed and in the best interest of the clan. Rarely did anyone ever dispute their rulings and every two years new council members were elected. It appeared to be a very democratic society and crime was not a problem.

Opella explained that food was produced at different levels in the cave complex but there was no meat from cows and no bacon from pigs. There were hens, which produced a steady supply of eggs and chickens. Milk was provided by domesticated goats. One section was given over to a special wheat variety that they first came across from the visiting Traders. It was a winter wheat crop, developed for low light conditions.

Water was drawn from the many crystal-clear rivers that flowed through their kingdom. Water wheels, built under the waterfalls, provided the power for the majority of the mechanical services. Fish were abundant and somehow they

escaped or survived the waterfalls. Zepher was sure that Gemma had been lost when her boat was swept over one of the many waterfalls. The Lithanians believed the waterfalls eventually fell to the centre of the world.

The crystals that provided the light could also provide heat. Low grade, background warmth came from the walls but the crystals could also provide intense heat when the individual crystals were brought together. The heat became so intense that it was possible to melt and extract iron from the abundant ore that existed in other parts of the cliffside complex. And the Diamites were skilled metalworkers. They were able to add selected minerals, also extracted in the mines, to make iron and steel of many different types.

The stories of the council members were brought to a close when a man and a woman burst into their gathering. "Where is she?" the lady asked. "Where's my little sister?" She stopped and stared. "Is it really you Gemma?" Zeea asked. "You look so grown up."

"Of course, she's grown up. She's a woman now. But you're still my little sister. Come here Gemma and say hello to your brother." With that, he grabbed her in a bear hug and twirled her around and around. "Put her down, Geldus. You're squeezing the life out of her." When Geldus released Gemma, with tears flowing down her face, Zeea embraced her, more gently. "We never thought we would ever see you again, Gemma. Where have you been all these years? We searched and searched but there was no trace of you or your canoe. Mum and Dad were devastated. The family was never the same again. They would be delighted to know you survived but sadly old age and worry took its toll and they passed away together two years ago."

“But now you’re back and I have a daughter, your niece, who is looking forward to meeting her new aunt.”

“And I have two children who cannot believe they now have two aunties,” said Geldus.

Jimmy could only watch, with a mile-wide smile, as Gemma greeted her long-forgotten family. Love and tears of happiness flowed like a river between the three until at last Gemma introduced Jimmy to her brother and sister. “And this is Jimmy. He’s the one who saved me when I was marooned down the well in Roombelow.”

“Roombelow?” Geldus queried. “Wherever is that?”

“That’s the town we live in at the other end of this underground world,” explained Jimmy. Geldus could not comprehend the meaning of ‘at the other end of the world’. To him and Zeea, the caves were the only world they knew. Any further explanation would take forever and confuse them further. “I think we’ll leave the explanations for later,” Jimmy suggested. “Now it’s time to get to know you and your families before I must return to Roombelow. Gemma has no family ties in Roombelow but I have, sort of, been adopted by people in Roombelow and I also have an Aunt in the upper world. I know,” he said to the puzzled Geldus, “but I will try to explain it all later. It’s a long story.”

Zepher took over and made arrangements for the whole family to be reunited the following morning. Sitters had been arranged to look after the children until Geldus and Zeea returned to their respective homes later that evening. Neither had spare rooms in their caves for both the visitors but Zepher said that he could accommodate guests in his much larger residence, but only after a welcome-home-feast in honour of the new-found Gemma.

The evening passed so quickly. There were many toasts to Gemma and Jimmy and so many stories to tell about how Jimmy came from the star-world of Attalia and decided he would make Roombelow his home. Gemma recounted her adventure alongside Jimmy in the land of the Aquamites. There w5as just so much to tell and Gemma enjoyed hearing about her nephew and nieces. In next to no time, it was time for Geldus and Zeea to take the arm of their respective partners: wife, Iris, and husband, Max. They had to return to their homes to take over from the sitters and to check on their children. Zepher said that Gemma and Jimmy would be welcome to spend the next day, or two, in his home.

After bidding 'good nights' to Geldus and Zeea, Jimmy and Gemma were conducted by Zepher to his residence. Each was provided with a room in which to sleep and wash. Zepher explained how the water system was fed from a reservoir somewhere far above them and then was fed through stone channels to every home. Waste was carried away to a treatment process located in lower cave levels. Eventually, cleaned up water was returned to continue its journey through the caves, to end up who knows where. "And," said Zepha, "when you need to sleep you can turn down the lighting just by running your hand up or down the wall." Somehow the crystals detected the movement and adjusted the light levels.

After another long session trying to explain their world in Roombelow to the leader of the Diamites, tiredness finally caught up with them and they retired to their rooms for some much-needed sleep.

Chapter 18

Brother and Sister - Nephew and Nieces

The following morning, after a light cereal breakfast the family reunion took place in the Great Hall. Brother Geldus and his wife Iris introduced their two children: Zac and his twin sister Rachel, whose long blond hair hung in a single plait reaching halfway down her back. They were nine years old, going on ten and they were, initially, terribly shy.

Sister Zeea and husband Max introduced their six-year-old singleton daughter, Jade, to her new aunt and she immediately threw her arms around Gemma's neck. "Hello new Auntie Gemma," she giggled into Gemma's ear. After which she was like a limpet, refusing to let go.

Zepher and Opella took their leave. "Our apologies, but there is a Council business we must attend to. We'll meet up again at my residence, later, after you've had more time to get to know each other. Perhaps then we can make some plans for Gemma's future." But no-one was thinking that far ahead.

The twins quickly overcame their initial shy introductions and were already cross-examining *Gemma about her life outside of the only world they knew of: the Diamites' world of Lithania. The three children were gathered around her, eyes agog, listening to Gemma's stories about Matilda the witch who lived with her companion black cat in the house on the hill. No-one thought it strange that Gemma should live in a cave at the bottom of the well in Roombelow. After all,

they all lived in caves which were comfortable homes. Jade sat in Gemma's lap spellbound by stories of a world she could not even imagine. The children cringed in fear when she told them about meeting one-eyed trolls, at the top of a mountain, in the snow. "What is snow?" asked Zac. The children had never seen nor felt snow beneath their feet.

Jimmy attempted to answer Zac's question. "Snow is just a different form of water, which you have all around you. Your world of Lithania is a world protected from extremes. It is never too hot nor cold. In many other worlds, like Roombelow, the temperature sometimes falls below shivering until you can see your breath condense like clouds in front of you."

"I've never seen that," Zac said.

"Nor I," said his father, Geldus.

"Well. Sometimes the temperature falls even further. Past being cold. Lower than shivering. Past where fingers turn blue with cold. That is when the magic of snow happens.

The vapour in your breath and the water vapour you see in clouds condenses into tiny crystals, around pinpricks of dust. You can't see the magic happen but those tiny crystals grow and grow, like long fingers, until they are big enough to see. And each one forms a wonderful pattern which disappears when those crystals, called snowflakes, land on your warm hand or face. Your crystals of diamonites are hard solid and heavy. A snowflake is lighter than a feather, fluffier than you could ever imagine and more intricate than the finest spiders web you have ever seen. And each one is different from the next. No two flakes are the same. But when they hit the ground, they stick to each other and begin to

build up in layers, if it is snowing, then you cannot tell one from another. They all sort of clump together.”

“I want to see snow,” an excited Jade exclaimed. “But I don’t like the sound of being cold.”

Jimmy laughed. “But you can’t have one without the other, Jade.”

And so, it went on, with questions, questions, and more questions. Gemma’s brother, Geldus, and sister Zeea could hardly get a word squeezed into the question-and-answer session. The youngsters were entranced by the stories of a world they never knew existed. “Perhaps,” said Gemma, “we’ll be able to take you there, one day. But it is a very long journey. Jimmy can do it in under half a day, only because he is wearing his Attalian boots.”

“Can we have red boots like Jimmy’s?” asked Jade.

“The only place you would find another pair of boots like these is on my star world home, Attalia,” explained Jimmy. “But I don’t think you’ll ever get to make that journey.”

“But we can still come to see you in Roombelow. Can’t we? Uncle Jimmy?” Rachel pleaded. And that was it. Jimmy became the adopted uncle of the Zapheer family’s children.

“Hold on there, children,” said Zeea, “Uncle Jimmy and Aunt Gemma have only just got here and here you are trying to send them back to Roombelow already. We’ve hardly had time to get to know our long-lost sister and there is a lot more to tell her about our lives here in Lithania. But that will have to wait. Max and I have to go to a meeting with the Council. So, we’ll meet up again later.”

Jade pleaded. “I can stay with Aunt Gemma, can’t I?”

Max, her father, agreed that she could and off they went to their meeting leaving Jade with her aunts and uncles and cousins, Zac and Rachel.

“Where shall we start?” Iris asked.

“Let’s take them home and show them where we live and play,” suggested Zac.

“That’s a good idea, Zac, and we can hope that seeing more of Lithania might bring back some of Gemma’s lost memories,” said Geldus. “Lead on children and Zac, watch Jade.”

“Great!” The twins chorused. But there was no way Jade was going to leave hold of Gemma’s hand. The twins led the way, followed by the new best friends. Jimmy, Iris, and Geldus brought up the rear. They made progress through a network of wide and high passage-ways, all lit by the glowing crystals embedded in the smooth, rock walls. “Head for our home hall first,” said Iris. “It’s quite close by.”

Geldus explained that each hall housed the cave-homes of related clans. There were as many as twenty or thirty homes in each hall. Two more halls were connected to the first by two further passages and so Lithania grew outwards like the spokes of a giant wheel.

Each cave was entered from a stairway cut into the stone walls and each cave-dwelling had several more adjoining ‘rooms’. Geldus said, “Show Jimmy and Gemma your bedrooms. They had better be tidy.”

“Of course they are,” Zac said and the twins took great delight in taking them up yet more stone stairways which led to their small, sparsely furnished rooms. Nothing was out of place and there was a space for everything. “This is a lot tidier than my room,” Jimmy said. There was a shelf for books and recesses for shoes

and clothing. There were toys piled into larger recesses but, as Jimmy said, everything was tidy.

Another space was laid out as a dining area and others were designed as living spaces. There were even bathrooms with hot and cold running water; everything that you would expect in a normal house.

Every level of the network included one great chamber which served as a socialising and play area. Children thronged the play areas on swings and roundabouts and played bat and ball games while parents relaxed around hewn stone tables around the perimeter. Geldus explained that there were also schooling areas in special areas.

“The only thing that seems to be missing,” Jimmy said, “is a sky with clouds and wind and rain and snow and ice.”

“The crystals provide all the light and heat that we need,” said Geldus.

Jimmy asked, “Do you have a ‘night-time’?”

Iris said. “When we have sleep-time the crystal lights get dimmer and during wake-time, the light gets brighter. One cycle of light and dark is called a day. Of course, we also have meal-time, work-time, school-time, study-time and playtime and relaxation time. We don’t have to work for very long during the daytime.”

They left Geldus’s home and continued the tour of Lithania.

It was not immediately obvious that some of the connecting passages went uphill and the next clan’s dwellings could be directly overhead separated by a meter or two of solid rock. Chambers directly above were connected by stairways and there are also people carriers near the entry and exit of each level. The carriers were amazing feats of hydraulic engineering. Even Jimmy was impressed with the operation of the lifts.

The lifts were open side cubicles joined together in a constantly moving conveyor connecting the different cave levels. One side was moving up while the other side was going downward at quite a leisurely pace. Their movement was driven by water. At the very top of the conveyor, water flowed into a large holding tank, under every cubicle. The weight of the water caused the cubicle to move downward and when the cubicle reached the bottom it was drained. That made it lighter in weight, so then it was pulled upward again.

There was a clever system that kept the weights balanced when someone stepped into a moving cubicle, depending on whether they were going up or down. "But what happens," asked Gemma, "if you don't get out at the bottom before it starts going up again? Do you get rolled over?"

Iris laughed. "It doesn't go upside down, Gemma. It simply rolls around its supporting spindle. So you just have to wait until it gets back to the level you want and then you step off. There is a short pause at every level so you don't have to hurry."

"Come on Aunt Gemma," said Jade, tugging at Gemma's hand, impatient to get moving.

"Let's show them the diamonite mine," suggested Geldus.

On the downward slope into the mining area, Jimmy noticed that no miners were working, anywhere. "Do you have miners to dig out the mine?" Jimmy asked.

"No.," Geldus said, with a smile. "It's all automatic, Jimmy. The only time we get involved is at the sorting stage." Geldus continued. "High-pressure water jets blast the rock into small pieces. These are carried in the stream of water to the

crushing machine. Then the smaller fragments of rock get washed away. That leaves the gems which are collected from the bottom of the separation tanks.”

“What sort of gems do you recover, Geldus?” Asked Gemma.

“Mainly diamonites” answered Iris. “That’s a type of diamond except, of course, a diamond doesn’t give out light or heat. We also extract much rarer emeralds, a few rubies, and even rarer number of sapphires and opals. There are even some areas that produce small quantities of gold and silver.”

“Lithania must be a very rich land,” said Jimmy, “with all these precious gemstones.”

“The gems are certainly very important, Jimmy. We trade them for materials that we don’t make or grow ourselves, like wood, woven cloths and fine-spun materials and foodstuffs that we can’t grow here.”

“Don’t you use money?”

“We know about money but we have no use for it here. We just barter and trade, exchanging things between ourselves.”

“Who do you trade with?” Jimmy asked.

“Well, it’s just the ‘Traders’,” Geldus replied.

“And where do they come from?” queried Gemma.

“They say they come from a land far away. Somewhere under a sky, whatever that is.”

“How do they get here?”

They had continued walking out of the mine area and stopped in a large oval cavern laid out with swings and slides and lots of apparatus for children to climb on. Around the perimeter, there were tables and chairs and they gathered around the largest one.

“They tell us it’s a long journey.” Geldus continued. “They travel across an enormous lake in a sailing ship, which takes a day and a night, and then they drag the supplies on to sleds for the last part of the journey. Altogether it may take two or three days for them to get here depending on what they are bringing us. Of course, it’s a faster return journey for them. The gems we trade aren’t heavy and they fit into quite small sacks.

“I’d like to meet the Traders,” said Jimmy.

“Of course, you can,” Geldus said. “But they are not due for another visit for some while. I’m sure if we ask Zepher or Opella they’ll be able to tell you more precisely.”

“I can only stay for one more day, at the most,” Jimmy said. “My family and friends in Roombelow are expecting my return by then. Gemma can stay as long as she wants to but one of us must let Mr McDonald know we are safe.”

Gemma said, “I would like to stay here, at least for a while, Jimmy. I’ve got a whole new family to get to know,”

“Yes! Please stay,” chorused Gemma’s nieces and nephew.

“That’s fine by me,” Jimmy said. “I’ll come back to see what you want to do, in about seven days. But first, I’ll ask Zepher when he’s next expecting a visit from the Traders. Perhaps I can come back then.”

“Can Aunt Gemma stay with us?” pleaded Rachel.

“That’s a bit difficult Rachel,” Iris said. “We don’t have a spare room.”

“We do,” said Jade, hopefully.

“We’ll have to check with your mom first, Jade,” Iris said. “But I think Zepher will want our guest to stay with him and Rubia. They have a home with a great many rooms.”

“But Gemma isn’t a guest. She’s family,” Jade pleaded with a pouting downcast look.

Finally, they agreed to wait until they all were together again, after the council meeting that Zeea and Max were attending.

“That won’t finish for a while so, what can we show Jimmy and Gemma next?” Geldus asked.

“I know,” Zac said. “Let’s take Gemma for a boat trip on the river.”

“Great idea, Zac,” Iris said. “Where’s the nearest boathouse?”

Rachel chimed in. “There’s one in the next hall. Follow me.”

Chapter 19

Exploring Lithania

Two boats were needed to hold everyone. They chose the canoe style, seating two abreast on wooden benches. It was decided: Geldus and Iris would each captain one boat. Geldus was captain of the boat that Gemma and Jade climbed into. Rachel, Zac and Jimmy joined Iris. Each of the sailors wielded a short-handled paddle. The flow of the stream was languid and they headed upstream, stroking the water in unison.

Within a few minutes of paddling, they were deep into the tunnels through which the rivers flowed. The subdued, gentle glow of diamonite crystals, embedded in the rock walls, lit the way. There were also diamonites in the bedrock of the river, giving the crystal clear water an ethereal glow. The scales of the darting trout-like fish reflected rainbows through the waters. The diamonites light up immediately in front of the boats and for a few yards behind, increasing in intensity on their approach, then dimming as they passed by.

“It is quite breathtaking,” Jimmy said.

“We don’t come boating very often,” said Iris. “It’s a jigsaw of interconnecting passageways joining together hundreds of caverns. And they haven’t all been explored.”

“And you have to be careful of waterfalls,” Zac added. “Some come crashing from above and others go tumbling downwards.”

“Everyone thinks that is how Gemma disappeared,” came Geldus’ voice from behind them. “It was the only explanation for not being able to find any trace of her when she went missing. Everyone knew she loved exploring.”

“And that’s why you two aren’t allowed on the rivers by yourselves,” said Iris, addressing the twins in her boat. “Even us oldies don’t like getting too close to waterfalls. The other danger is getting sucked down when rivers meet a solid stone wall and just disappear under it. And that is why we stick to those places that have been thoroughly checked and are well mapped.”

Just then, they emerged from the tunnel into a gargantuan cavern. There were no dwellings around the lake which filled the central space and stretched far into the distance. They beached the canoes, side by side, splashed through the shallows and stepped ashore to stretch their legs. “Look!” shouted Jade. “Up there.” She pointed at a spot twenty meters above them. It was just at the spot where the cavern walls began to arch over the lake. “Something moved.”

“It’s nothing to worry about Jade,” Jimmy said in a reassuring tone. “It’s just a colony of bats. I saw them when I first visited Lithania. I had to ask them to help me find Tony’s lost dog, Daisy.”

“How can you ask a bat for help?” queried Zac.

Gemma chipped in. “That’s because Jimmy can talk to animals.”

“Not all the time,” Jimmy laughed. “Only when I’m wearing Witch Matilda’s magic ring. But I didn’t bring it on this trip.”

Jade said, “I would love to meet a witch, Aunt Gemma.”

“Perhaps,” Gemma suggested, “we’ll be able to introduce you to Matilda, one day soon.”

Gemma felt that she couldn't make a promise, but what else could she say without dashing her new niece's enthusiasm? Gemma had become part of a very different world. Jade and her cousins had only ever known the world within the borders of Lithania. Jimmy, of course, knew two of the subterranean worlds Roombelow and Lithania, also the terrestrial 'upper' world. In addition, there were the interstellar worlds of the cosmos, which included his home planet Attalia. Not even Gemma's older brother and sister would be able to get their heads around the complexities of life and multiplicity of worlds beyond their homeland. Explanations would have to come a bit at a time, later.

"Come on," said Rachel, tugging at Iris's sleeve. "Let's see what else we can find."

"OK, OK," Iris responded. "Lead on Miss Intrepid. But stay out of the water."

The youngsters skipped on ahead, Jade between her older cousins. Gemma was only a few years younger than her sister but it was difficult to guess Jimmy's age. He had become much wiser than his years suggested. All they could say was that he was older than the twins and younger than Gemma. He appeared to be an early teenager. Not that age mattered. What mattered was how people conducted themselves and Jimmy acted like the natural leader he had become. At the same time, he showed respect for those around him who were older. He had come a long way from those days when he was mercilessly bullied because of his unusual appearance. His self-confidence and stature had increased with every new adventure and continued with every new step he took.

The group made slow progress along the wall of the cavern. The diamonites embedded in the rock were fewer than in the main thoroughfares and

they seemed to react more slowly. They still brightened when the group approached and then dimmed once they had passed but the way was not lit as brightly as before.

“Watch your step everyone,” warned Geldus. “The ground is becoming quite broken up. There are some large cracks in the bedrock.”

“Look!” said Jade. “My foot goes right down this hole.”

“Get your foot out of there, Jade,” Iris admonished Jade. “Uncle Geldus and I are supposed to be looking after you. Whatever would your mom and dad have to say if you got hurt.”

“I’ll keep a hold of her hand, mom,” offered Rachel.

“Spoilsport,” countered Jade.

“Children! Behave!” chided Gemma. “No more arguments.”

Zac assured Gemma, “We are not really arguing, Aunt Gemma. Just a little bit of fun.”

“Let’s keep going,” suggested Zac. “I don’t remember coming this way before. And look! There’s a tunnel just up ahead.”

In the dim light, the dark mouth of an opening loomed closer. “Let’s explore,” said Jade, dragging Rachel with her. Jimmy and Gemma caught up with them. “Let’s not,” said Gemma. “There are no diamonites in the walls to light the way.”

“Well, I have never seen that before,” Geldus said. “Not in Lithania.”

Jimmy ran his hands over the walls of the tunnel. “It feels as if there are holes chipped into the rock, all over. See here, it looks as if all the diamonites have been chipped out of the rock. The floor is covered in loose chippings.”

“Well, I never,” echoed Iris. “Why would anyone want to take our diamonites?”

“They may be common in your world, Iris,” Jimmy said, “But I’ve never seen anything like them in Roombelow nor in the upper world, where I used to live with Aunt Ethel”

“We need to explore this further,” said Gemma, “but we can’t go any further in than this. There’s nothing to light the way. We’ll need lamps or torches.”

“What’s a lamp?” asked Rachel.

“It’s a light you can carry around,” explained Jimmy.

“No one has a lamp in Lithania, Jimmy,” Geldus said. “Wherever we go the diamonites light our way.”

“Well!” said Gemma. “There are no diamonites in Roombelow. We use oil lamps to give us light when it gets dark.”

“What a strange world Roombelow must be,” Jade said.

“Not strange,” Gemma said. “Just different.”

“I’ll bring one or two lamps with me when I come back to meet the Traders,” Jimmy said. “Then perhaps we can explore this passage further.”

“All right, everyone.” Geldus took control. “We’ll have to stop speculating about what might be going on here. It’s time to get back to the Council Hall. Zeea and Max should be finished their business now. Come on. Let’s head back to the boats.”

They retraced their steps around the lake and relaunched the two canoes. After paddling back to the boathouse they docked the boats and were soon gathered in the hallway outside the Council Hall waiting for Zeea and Max.

There were other representative's family members waiting for the meeting to be over. They sat at one of the many tables in the public area, talking about their different worlds. Zac wanted to know if Jimmy still went to a school in Roombelow. "Yes, Zac. I was moved up from the juniors to the senior class when I got back from visiting Attalia."

"If you'd stayed on Attalia would you still have had to go to school?" Rachel asked.

"That's right, Rachel. Schooling goes on for years longer in Attalia. That's probably because there's so much more to learn about so many advanced pieces of equipment. Some of it is so complicated it takes ages to even learn how to use it, never mind how to build it or maintain it.

"But it is a lot more relaxed in Roombelow. They concentrate on just the three 'r's: reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic. School days are short, three or four hours at the most, and holidays are long. I'll probably be finished with schooling after this next term."

"That's the school I want to go to," piped in Jade.

Jade's Aunt Iris laughed. "You've hardly got started at your first school, Jade, and you want to stop learning before you've started."

"But school is so boring, Aunt Iris."

"No, it's not, Jade. You are always telling me about the stories you are reading at school. And you keep a diary. Your mom says you hardly ever miss writing an entry every day."

"I do enjoy storytime and writing in my diary but I don't like arithmetic. What use is a triangle or a square root, or even a parallel gram."

Zac laughed. "I think you mean parallelogram, Jade."

“Whatever,” huffed Jade. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“It may not make much sense now, Jade,” said Jimmy, “but it could be very useful when you get older. I suppose that depends on what you want to do when you leave school to start working.”

“I don’t know, Jimmy. That’s so far away.”

Geldus suggested, “You enjoy these childhood days while you can, Jade. Life becomes more and more complicated with every passing year. And believe me, every skill you learn at this stage will become useful at some time, or other, in the future.”

“You can’t escape it, Jade,” said Iris. “You might as well just accept that that is the way it’s going to be, for a good many years yet.”

“Pooh!” retorted Jade.

“That’s enough of that, Jade,” came the stentorian reprimand from Jade’s father. Max and Zeea had just got out of the council meeting.

“What have you all been up to,” Zeea asked, “while we’ve been busy in the Council?”

“We’ve been showing Jimmy and Gemma a few of the rivers and lakes, Aunt Zeea,” Zac replied.

“And we found a place where diamonites are being taken away,” interjected Rachel. “Whoever is taking the crystals is taking them all. They’re not leaving even a few to light the way.”

“It was too dark to explore, Auntie Zeea,” Jade added. “but Jimmy said he would bring lamps so that we can go further in when he returns from Roombelow.”

“It certainly needs closer scrutiny,” Max said. “The only place where you are supposed to take diamonites is in the designated mining areas.”

“And that’s only if you have a license from Council,” added Zeea.

“It looks like these lamps from Roombelow are going to come in useful. When are you returning to Roombelow, Jimmy?” asked Max.

Jimmy replied, “I’d like to set off tomorrow morning and I’ll come back to see how things are working out in about a week, or so. That depends on when the Traders will next be here. Any news from the Council, Max?”

“Zirco, the Councillor in charge of bartering, said he thought they should be here within seven to eight days,” Max answered. “The gemstones are being prepared and polished, ready to trade.”

“That’s settled then! I’ll be back to see you all in seven days and I’ll arrange to spend a few days with you so I won’t have to hurry back to Roombelow. And I’ll bring as many oil lamps as I can carry.”

Gemma said, “It would be very helpful if we can find out what’s happening to the diamonites.”

“I would hate to think that someone may be stealing our treasures,” Max said.

“It would be so sad,” Zeea added. “But let’s not jump to conclusions. There may be another explanation and let’s hope that Jimmy and Gemma can help us solve the mystery.”

“In the meanwhile,” Iris said. “Let’s have a party for the children and have some fun before their bedtime. Gemma and Jimmy are staying overnight again with Zepher and Rubia. When Jimmy leaves in the morning Gemma can come and stay in our home”

“Fantastic! Great!” shouted an excited Jade. “Aunt Gemma will be able to tell me all about her adventures with Jimmy in Roombelow. I’m dying to hear more about the monsters and the witches.”

“I think it’s just as well there’s no school at the moment,” Zeea said. “You’ve timed your visit just right, Gemma. We are at the beginning of a two-week, mid-term holiday, time enough for you and Rachel and Zac, to get to know your new Aunt Gemma.”

“And for me to get to know you Zeea, and my brother, Geldus,” Gemma added. “So much of my life before waking up at the bottom of the well in Roombelow is a blank.” There was a group hug which included Jimmy and the children. “In fact, to get to know all my family, including Iris and Max, my sister-in-law and my brother-in-law. Perhaps something might jolt my brain into remembering what my life was like before I arrived at the bottom of the well in Roombelow.”

Chapter 20

Jimmy returns to meet the Traders

The following days passed so quickly. In what seemed like no-time-at-all, but in fact a week had passed, Jimmy had returned to Roombelow to let Mr McDonald and Amanda know that all was well and now he was on his way back to Lithania loaded with equipment. Slung over his shoulder was a long coil of rope, oil lamps and oil. Hammers and chisels clanked together with other tools in the sailcloth haversack he carried on his back. His lunchtime sandwiches were long gone and he had drunk most of the water from his hip flask. It was early afternoon as he began the long climb up the cliffside to the opening that gave entrance to the hidden world of the Diamites.

Once again Jimmy apologised for disturbing the slumbering bats, suspended from the ceiling of the caves. He had remembered to borrow Matilda's magic ring; the one which, when worn on the little finger of the left hand, allowed the wearer to speak in animal-talk. Even though different animals speak different languages the ring gave Jimmy the ability to converse with any animal. You may recall, Gemma had learned to speak "fish-talk" when she had been marooned at the bottom of the well in Roombelow.

Jimmy headed for the council chambers where he expected to find either Head Councilor, Zepher, or Rubia, his wife. Zepher was busy in yet another meeting and Rubia explained that it couldn't be interrupted, but she expected

things to be finished within an hour or so. It had something to do with Zirco finalising the details of requirements for the trader's next visit.

So Jimmy said he would return a little later and continued through the brightly lit passageways, heading for the home of Gemma's sister Zeea and, of course, her youngest niece, Jade. It was Jade who spotted Jimmy approaching the family in the play area. "It's Uncle Jimmy," she shouted. "He's come back like he said he would."

"Of course I'm back, Jade. I always try to keep my promises. And how are you, Gemma? You're looking very happy with yourself."

"I couldn't be better," Jimmy, she said, while hugging him close. She whispered, "but of course I've missed you." She untangled herself a little self consciously. "I've been getting to know my family, which I would never have thought existed if you hadn't brought me back to Lithania."

Zeea gave Jimmy a quick hug. "It's been fantastic for all of us, including the children. They now have a new aunt who tells them wonderful stories, of witches and magic spells and monster trolls and mermaids and giant eels. And what's more, she can talk to the fish in the lakes and rivers."

"Anybody can do that," laughed Gemma. "You just have to spend a long time with them with no one else to talk to."

Zach and Rachel were nowhere to be seen. "Where are the twins?" Jimmy asked.

"They should be back here soon. Max has had them helping him to move furniture for Gemma. We'll probably need more chairs and a bigger table if she decides to move in with us permanently. Jade, however, preferred to stay here. She didn't want to be separated from her new Aunt Gemma."

Jade pleaded, "Please stay Aunt Gemma. It's been so much fun since you came to live with us."

"Well, I certainly expect to stay for a while longer, Jade. But I don't know about the long term, there's still so much to sort out. Eventually, I will need a home of my own. Close to you, of course," she said, giving Jade a reassuring hug. "I don't know what lies in the future."

"Are you staying, Uncle Jimmy?" Jade asked.

"Certainly I'm planning on staying for a day or two, at the very least. I may be able to stay for a week or so, but that depends on how long I can stay with Zepher and Rubia."

"I'm certain that won't be a problem, Jimmy," said Max. "There are so many guest rooms in the council chambers. Zepher said he was expecting you to stay with him when you came back to Lithania."

"That would be great, Max, because I've brought these oil lamps with me so that we can explore that dark tunnel we found with Geldus and Iris, on my last visit. Then I'd also love to meet the Traders. They seem to have travelled a long way to get to Lithania. Where do they come from?"

"All we know is what they tell us: from a land above, at the end of an enormous lake but beneath a sky," answered Zeea.

"That could almost be like the land above where my Aunt Ethel lives, in Esh Village," Jimmy said. "Except there isn't a lake anywhere near Esh. Just a forest with hundreds of different trees."

"Do you mean a place where real trees are growing?" Zeea asked.

"Yes," Jimmy replied. "It is a very different world from Lithania."

“And we’ve visited the world of the Aquamites, in their underground emerald lake,” added Gemma.

“And there are still, even more, worlds far, far away beyond the stars,” continued Jimmy.

“What’s a star?” Jade asked.

“I suppose,” Jimmy said, “That stars are very much like your diamonites but instead of being trapped inside the rocks they are hanging in the sky.”

“I want to see a star,” Jade pleaded. “And I want to see the sky. Can I? Can I, Mummy? Please.”

“Jade,” said Gemma, “I have never seen a star either. There are no stars in Roombelow.”

Zeea smiled at Jade’s enthusiasm and tried to pacify her. “I’m sure that day will come, Jade, but you still have a lot of growing up before you can go off on adventures like Uncle Jimmy and Aunty Gemma.”

Jade appeared to be a little subdued after that exchange, but all it took was a single hug from Gemma and her good mood was restored.

Just then the twins arrived back in the leisure area, running ahead of Geldus. “We’re finished your room, Aunt Gemma,” shouted Zac.

“There are new cupboards and a bigger bed in your room, now,” added Rachel, “and mum had some new clothes for you. They’re all hung up in your wardrobe.”

“That’s so kind of you, Zeea, to have gone to all that trouble when we don’t know what’s going to happen. I haven’t made any plans for the future. I don’t yet know what I am going to do. You shouldn’t have gone to all that trouble.”

“Nothing is too much trouble for my long lost little sister.” Zeea and Gemma hugged and were joined in a tight circular group by Jade and Rachel. The male members of the family, Jimmy included, laughed together and bumped fists.

Just then a messenger arrived. He relayed a request from Zepher, head of the council, to meet him at his residence as soon as they could. The meeting was now over and he was ready to welcome Jimmy back to Lithania. Gemma and the rest of the family were included in the invitation and together they made their way back to the Great Hall. Zepher’s home was in a group of caverns and smaller caves all linked to the Great Hall. Zepher was seated at one of the many stone tables laid around the outer walls of the Hall, with Rubia, his wife. Also sat at the table were Opella, deputy leader, and her husband Argos.

The Zapheer family joined the group and arranged themselves around the table. Included, of course, were Zeea and Max.

“The Traders,” announced Zepher, “are expected to arrive within the next two days. It is not possible to be more precise because of the long journey they take to reach us. They will be bringing fresh supplies of timber, some salted cow meat, lots of fruit and more wine. We can’t make wine because we haven’t managed to grow the vines that produce grapes.”

“I have noticed that even in your brightest caves there isn’t as much light as there is in natural sunlight,” Jimmy said. But that was something the Diamites just could not imagine. Not even Gemma, who had lived in the underground world of Roombelow for several years, had experienced direct sunshine and the warmth and brightness of a shining sun. Perhaps that was the explanation for the lack of fresh fruit like apples and pears. “But we do grow ubar,” Zeea said.

“Ubar?” Jimmy queried.

“Yes,” offered Zirco, who was the Diamites main contact with the Traders. “The Traders brought us some pale pink sticks of ubar many years ago. They said it would grow even in darkness. That’s what makes our favourite drink when it is crushed.”

“Now I know what it is,” Jimmy said, laughing. “Aunt Ethel grows some of this in her garden. It’s called rhubarb!”

“What a funny name,” Jade said.

“We only know it as ubar,” said Zirco, “ but I can understand how its name must have been shortened over the years.”

“Well, Jimmy,” Zepher interrupted, “your room is ready for you whenever you need it. You are welcome to stay with us for as long as you want to. Zirco will let you know when the Traders are arriving so that you can come and meet them. You’ll be able to see how we barter our precious stones. We told the Traders what we needed the last time they visited. The purpose of our council meeting today was to draw up a new list of things we would like to trade on their next visit to Lithania.”

Zirco continued. “Once they know what we need they can tell us, within a day or so, when they will return, usually within four to five weeks. We are expecting their arrival, not tomorrow, but the next morning. The trade takes place here so if you’re staying with Zepher we can all meet here after breakfast.”

“Good idea, Zirco,” said Zepher, “and, of course, we expect Gemma will want to come with Zeea and Max. It would help if Geldus and Iris would look after the children for the morning otherwise it will get a little crowded here.”

"That's not a problem for us. Is it, Iris?"

"Not at all," came Iris's response. "I can see that things are likely to be very busy. It's the last place you want the children playing around."

"It's not so much about being in the way as it is about being safe. There's a lot of heavy supplies coming in on the Trader's sleds," Zepher explained.

Business and arrangements completed the families again enjoyed exchanging further details of their three very different worlds. The Zapheer family were still struggling to come to terms with the wonders of the world Gemma woke up in when she found herself at the bottom of the well in Roombelow. The magic of a Weather Man and a real witch, Matilda, were beyond them. But when Jimmy described the land above that, below a sky, there was nothing in their experience to compare it to.

Opella and Argos had arranged for food to be served and the party atmosphere continued some way into evening hours before sleep beckoned the children to bed. Jade was first to nod off, despite every part of her not wanting to miss a single word of the adult's conversations. Zac and Rachel were not far behind, stifling their yawns as they fought to stay awake. Iris and Geldus were adamant that the twins needed their rest and insisted they too retire for a good night's rest. They decided to explore the tunnel with the missing diamonites the following morning. At the end of the evening, Gemma went off to her 'temporary' new home with Zeea and Max and Jade. Jimmy ended his night in the guest quarters of Zepher and Rubia's apartments, happy to be among friends.

Chapter 21

Missing Diamonites

Geldus and Iris, with the twins, started the day by calling at the Xander family's cave to collect Gemma and Jade. Zeea and Max were going to be busy with general council business later that morning so could not join them. Jade was happy just to be with her new Auntie Gemma. Together they made their way to Zepher's home in the Council Halls to met up with Jimmy.

Breakfast was over and they talked about what they intended to do. They planned to explore further into the tunnel where they had previously seen signs of missing diamonites. Iris had prepared drinks and snacks for them, and Zach and Rachel carried them in over- the- shoulder bags. Jimmy had brought with him three oil lamps, from Roombelow. He set them on the table and carefully filled the oil reservoirs. He left the half-empty bottle of oil with Zepher before they set off.

They collected two three-seater canoes from the boathouse and set off. They only paddled for a short while before they reached an enormous cavern where the stream became a lake. They followed the left-hand shoreline for several minutes before Gemma beached the canoes on the gravelled shore. Jimmy and Geldus led the way. They walked only a short distance before they came to the dark opening of the tunnel where there were no diamonites to light the way. Jimmy set the lamps on the pebbles and opened one of the lamp's

hinged windows and wound up the wick. Then he struck his flintstone against the striker to create a shower of hot sparks. The sparks fell onto the wick of one of the oil lamps. The wick was made of a coil of thin cord which sat in the oil reservoir. Just the end tip of the coiled cord was exposed through the centre of a metal cap above the reservoir of oil. The heat of the sparks ignited the oil's vapour and the flames on the wicks grew higher and brighter. Zac, Rachel and Jade were mesmerised by the flickering flames.

Gemma laughed. "I remember being amazed the first time I saw an oil lamp in Roombelow. But if you don't have diamonites to light your way they certainly are very useful in the dark."

"I cannot imagine living without the light the diamonites give us," Zac said.

"There are no diamonites in Roombelow, Zac. We have daylight but during the evenings and night time we need to light lamps to give us enough light to see."

"Light during the daytime? Without diamonites? That's unbelievable," marvelled Rachel.

"I'm sure you are going to get a chance to visit Roombelow sometime in the future," Jimmy said. "But first of all, we have to find out what is happening to the crystals here in Lithania. So let's get going."

Geldus carried one lamp and led the way alongside Jimmy who was laden with a coil of rope over his shoulder and a hammer and chisel hanging from his belt. They were followed by Gemma, carrying another lamp, with Jade. Bringing up the rear were Iris, Zac and Rachel with the third lamp. Flickering shadows bounced around them but there was no sign of any diamonites. It was

so unusual not to have the benefit of the light of the diamonites in the kingdom of Lithania. “ never before have I seen anywhere in Lithania as dark as this. Not even in the mines where the machines dig out the diamonites,” Geldus said.

“But surely,” Jimmy said, “If the diamonites are taken out of the walls by machines they must also take away their light.”

“That’s partially true, Jimmy. Diamonite crystals are spread throughout the bedrock. If you scrape one layer off, like the machines in the mines do, there will be another layer just a little deeper in the rock.”

“So that explains why this tunnel is dark,” Gemma added. “The diamonites have been chipped off the surface and the next layer is still buried in the rock.”

“Spot on, Gemma,” said Iris. “Someone has just skimmed the surface diamonites, the easiest ones to get at.”

“Let’s see how far the thieves have chipped out the diamonites,” Gemma said, as they moved further into the tunnel.

The floor of the tunnel snaked gradually upwards. Their feet slipped on the loose surface of chippings. The path became a steep incline, spiralling around on itself. Jimmy persuaded Jade and the twins to tie the rope around their waists. Slipping and sliding they edged further and further up the incline. Jimmy led the snake each taking sideways steps to maintain some grip on the loose surface. Jimmy’s larger than average feet gained him a firm footing, He took the lead holding tight to the rope that wound around the children’s waists.

“It looks like it’s becoming less steep,” Jimmy said. A few minutes later they were all standing, together on what was now almost level ground. Geldus untied the rope from around the children and passed the coil back to Jimmy. “It

should be a lot easier underfoot now,” Geldus said and they set off again still walking and crunching on flakes of rock chipped off the roof and walls of the tunnel.

After continuing their exploration for a distance of about a kilometre, it was Geldus who first noticed that there was a glow of light coming from up ahead. “Look,” he said. “We’ve almost reached the end of the chippings and a few diamonites are shining through.”

“Thank goodness,” Jade said. “I’ll be so pleased to see where we’re going again. The dark was a bit frightening.”

Gemma gave Jade a little hug. “There’s no need to be afraid, Jade. You’ve got all your family around to protect you.”

“And,” continued Iris, “there’s nothing in Lithania that will hurt you.”

“As long as you stay away from waterfalls,” Geldus added with a laugh.

The floor of the tunnel was now firm underfoot. They turned a bend in the tunnel and without warning the roof disappeared and the walls of the tunnel swept away left and right into the distance. “Wow!” was the universal response. There was space for the party to spread out in what was a simply enormous cavern.

“I don’t think we need the lamps now,” Gemma said.

“Give them to me,” Jimmy said. “I’ll turn down the wicks. We’ll have to come back this way so let’s leave the lamps here and I’ll relight them when we come back.”

“Good thinking, Jimmy,” Iris added. “There’s no point in carrying them when we have the light from the diamonites.”

“Come on,” urged Gemma. “We haven’t got all day. Have we, Jade?”

“That’s right, Aunty Gemma. Let’s get going.”

Geldus and Iris set off across the cavern and they marvelled at the changing rainbow hues that the diamonites now created. “I don’t believe I have ever seen diamonites changing colours like this before,” Iris said.

“But it is beautiful. Isn’t it?” Rachel added.

They continued the trek through the Rainbow Cavern, as Jimmy had christened it. The floor of the cavern was smooth underfoot and they were able to walk at quite a brisk pace for almost an hour until Iris suggested they should stop to let the children rest for a short while and take advantage of a refreshing snack. Zac and Rachel unloaded the goodies from their satchel bags. There was plenty of snacks and drinks for everyone and they sat on the cold rock floor and ate. When they finished Zac said, “I wish we had stopped to eat earlier.”

“Why is that, Zac?” asked Iris.

“Because our satchels are a lot lighter now,” laughed Rachel.

Everyone laughed at that except Gemma. “Is something wrong, Gemma?” Jimmy asked.

“Not really. It’s just that it feels a bit damp on my behind,” she said feeling the seat of her leggings. “Come to think of it,” said Geldus, “I feel a bit wet too. I thought it was just my imagination but it’s definitely not. The ground looks wet in places and trust me to have chosen to sit on a wet patch. ”

Iris suggested, “Come on you two! You’ll soon dry off if we keep moving.”

And on they marched. It was Jimmy who first noticed that the ground was becoming slick with moisture. A little further on and there were few scattered puddles. Then they were standing at the edge of an enormous lake that stretched

out of sight into the distance. "I don't remember seeing this lake before," Geldus said.

"Nor I," Iris agreed. "Let's keep going along the shoreline for as long as we can."

The party followed the contour of the lake along the left side of the wide shore where little wavelets began to make the surface of the rainbow lake shimmer. The further they ventured along the shore the deeper the lake became so that eventually they could no longer see the bottom and the wavelets became more pronounced. Soon the little waves were gurgling as they broke up on the shore.

Jimmy asked, "I wonder what could be making the waves? There's hardly any breeze to ruffle the surface."

"This lake is enormous," Geldus said. "The waves could have started many miles away. There could be a waterfall in the distance. That would start the waves off and once they start rolling there may be nothing in their way to stop them from spreading."

"Just like when you throw a pebble into a pond," Zac said, looking up into his father's eyes. "You've got it, Zac," Geldus nodded and smiled. "Come on, then. Let's go on a bit further. It'll soon be time to start retracing our steps. I wouldn't like to think that Max and Zeea started to worry about where we had got to."

"OK! Geldus," Gemma agreed. "Let's give ourselves another half hour before we turn back."

They had not travelled much further into the cavern when Gemma pointed ahead. "Look," she said. "That looks like an opening to another tunnel."

And as they got closer Iris said, “ I know what this is! Look at the grooves in the floor of the cave. They lead into the tunnel. This has to be where the traders bring their goods ashore and transfer them onto sleds. This must be the great lake they sail across to get to Lithania and pulling the sleds across the stone floor has worn a path of grooves.”

“You’re right, Gemma. There’s no other explanation for the grooves,” Jimmy agreed. As did Geldus and Zeea. “I think,” pondered Geldus, “that this probably means the thieves taking our diamonites are the Traders.”

“It must be!” Jimmy concurred.

“But that is awful,” Iris said. “We deal fairly with the Traders. Why should they rob us of our light?”

“There are some things we are never going to understand,” Geldus said, and he put his arm around Iris’s shoulder.

“Greed is not something we see in Roombelow, either,” Jimmy added. “But it is a problem in the world above. I can only guess that wherever there are people who have a lot there are also people who only have a little. Well, those with little will always want some of what those who have a lot have.”

Gemma said, “And if everyone has the same, like here in Lithania, then there’s nothing to be greedy for.”

“Ah! If only everyone felt the same way, Gemma,” mused Jimmy.

Geldus brought any further conversation to an end. “It’s no good trying to solve the problems of the Traders while standing around at the edge of the lake. It’s time to be heading back. We can only report what we have discovered to Zepher. Perhaps the Council will have some idea of what to do next.”

When they reached the end of the lake Jimmy found the lamps where they had left them. Again, he created the hot sparks with his flintstone and relit the lamps. They continued the return journey and carefully negotiated the twisting, downward sloping, dark tunnel where the diamonites had been stripped away. When they emerged back into the light Jimmy untied the ropes that had kept the children together and safe.

Jimmy collected the lamps and extinguished the wicks. "It's not much further to where we beached the canoes," he said

"Goody," piped in Jade. "I'm really hungry, now."

"Jade," chided Iris, "Your mind is always on the next meal. It's surprising that you are so slim."

"I'm getting hungry, as well, Aunt Iris," said Rachel.

"That goes for me too," added Zac.

"If we do more walking and less talking we might get something to eat a bit quicker," Geldus laughed. "Come on. Quick march!"

Chapter 22

Who is taking Diamonites?

They pushed the canoes back into the lake and paddled along the river which had brought them to the lake. Once the canoes were docked safely at the boatyard they made their way to the very centre of Lithania and entered the cavernous Great Hall outside of the Council Chambers. Zeea and Max were waiting for them sitting at one of the many stone tables, drinking a fruit drink from a glass, filled from the stone flagon.

“I’m really dry after all that walking. Give me a drink, daddy,” Jade demanded. “I’m dying of thirst.”

“Jade,” said her mother. “That is not the way to ask for anything,” Zeea admonished Jade. “Where is the ‘please may I’?”

“You know better than to be so rude, Jade,” Max said. “Now apologise and try asking nicely this time.”

Jade hung her head, mumbled a ‘sorry’ and reached for her mother’s glass.

“I didn’t hear that,” said Max. “That is not an apology. Now, don’t show yourself up in front of your new Aunt and Uncle, Gemma and Jimmy.”

Tears threatened to spill from Jade’s brimming eyes. She certainly looked chastened. She threw her arms around Zeea’s neck and sobbed out her apology. “I’m so sorry Mummy. I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“That’s a bit better, Jade,” Max said. “Now you can have a drink, from my glass.”

“Thanks, daddy,” she murmured into his chest, holding him tight.

“I’ll get some more glasses and we can all have a drink,” Iris said and she collected more glasses, a fresh flagon of juice and a tray from a hatch in the wall.

Zeea spoke briefly to a messenger from the Council. She relayed the message from the Head of Council’s wife. “Rubia says she and Zepher will join us as soon as they wrap up the last details about the Traders visit. Opella and Argos are sorry that they cannot join us for tonight’s dinner. They have some family issues to attend to but they’ll be at tomorrow’s meeting.”

“How long do we have to wait for some food,” groaned Zac.

“Stop worrying about your stomach, Zac,” laughed Geldus. “I’m sure you won’t have long to wait.”

Just at that point, they were joined by Zepher and Rubia. Zepher was smiling broadly. “I heard the last part of that,” he said. “I’ll organise some food from the kitchens. It should only take a few minutes. I know there were plenty of left-overs after the Council meeting.”

Zepher quickly returned from the kitchens followed by two members of his staff, carrying four platters of cold snacks, some sweet and some savoury. They were placed in the centre of the table and once Geldus had nodded his permission Zac, Rachel and Jade were eating as if they hadn’t eaten for days. By the time the children had stopped eating there was very little food remaining on the platters.

“It’s just as well no one else is hungry at the moment,” Rubia said, smiling.

“I don’t think they’ll need anything else to eat, anytime soon,” added Iris. “They’ve consumed enough food to last them a week.”

“What?” Jade pouted. “Do you mean that there won’t be any supper tonight?”

That brought a roar of laughter from everyone around the table.

Gemma hugged Jade. “You’ll have to learn to control that appetite, Jade, or you’ll be putting on some weight.”

“It’s all right while you’re burning it up with all that energy,” Zeea explained to her full-of-life daughter, “but you’ll slow down as you get older and then it will catch up with you. It’s much better to be careful now with what you eat. Anyway, if you’ve finished eating you can all go and burn some of it off with a bit of exercise in the recreation area.”

“That’s fine by me,” Zac said. “C’mon you two let’s head for the level two park.”

“And look after Jade,” Max added.

“Don’t worry, Uncle Max,” Rachel said. “I’ll make sure they stay out of trouble.”

“There won’t be any trouble, daddy,” Jade said.

“OK!” Max said. “Don’t be away too long. Let’s say, one-hour maximum.”

“See you soon,” shouted Zac over his shoulder as they set off at a run, pleased to be free from the adults for a while.

“Should I go? To keep an eye on them,” asked Gemma.

“Don’t worry about them,” Iris said. “They’ll be fine and Zac won’t let them get into any trouble.”

“And it gives us a chance to tell Zepher about what we found, without being interrupted,” added Geldus.

Between them, they recounted to the Council Leader what they had found at the end of the tunnel where they had first spotted signs of missing diamonites. “We followed the tunnel with the help of the oil lamps Jimmy brought back from Roombelow. Almost the whole length of it was devoid of diamonites. When we reached the end we found ourselves in an enormous cavern in which we found a great lake. There could be no doubt that this was the lake the Traders sailed across to bring their cargoes to Lithania.” Geldus reported. “There were definite grooves in the cavern floor that showed where the Traders had dragged in the supplies on their sleds.”

“But,” said Jimmy, “the Trader’s tracks went down a different tunnel to the one that took us through the darkened tunnel. There weren’t any scrapes on the floor of that tunnel. Although there were plenty of chippings where diamonites had been taken.”

“That is very sad,” Zepher said. “We have been dealing with the Traders for many years. I certainly thought they were more than satisfied with the number of diamonites we traded.”

Gemma added her thoughts. “I think it’s a bit strange that there are tracks down one tunnel but none down the dark tunnel.”

“Perhaps not,” Jimmy said. “When the supplies are loaded onto the sleds they must be quite heavy. But when they return, they aren’t carrying anything heavy so they may not leave any tracks.”

“So,” pondered Zepher, “we now know there’s a problem. Someone is stealing our diamonites. What we don’t know, for certain, is who is taking them. I don’t want to make accusations against the Traders if they are innocent.”

“The only way to confirm the truth is to catch whoever is taking the diamonites, in the act,” suggested Geldus. “And the only way to do that will be to follow them after tomorrow’s trade meeting.”

Without hesitation, Jimmy stepped up. “I’ll do it, Zepher.”

“You’re a bit young to risk being caught, Jimmy. No one knows how they’ll react.”

“Well, first of all, I won’t get caught. They’ll never catch me when I’m wearing these boots.” Of course, Jimmy was referring to his rather large, red boots from his home star world of Attalia. “And secondly,” he continued, “I’m bigger than you. I don’t look anything like you or your people so if they see me they won’t be able to connect me to the Diamites.”

Gemma piped up. “It may sound reasonable, Jimmy, but you are forgetting that I am coming with you.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Gemma,” Geldus objected. “You have hardly been home more than a few days. There is no way we are going to risk anything happening to you.”

“But you’re prepared to let Jimmy take the risk on his own,” Gemma protested.

“Of course we don’t want Jimmy, nor anyone else, taking risks just because of a few missing diamonites,” Zepher said.

“But it is a lot more than just a few,” Jimmy said. “And in the places where they have taken the diamonites all that is left behind is blackness. No more heat or light.”

“I agree. It is serious but we don’t want anyone getting hurt on our behalf,” added Rubia.

“Don’t worry, Rubia,” Gemma said. “Jimmy and I have faced greater dangers than that. But there won’t be any trouble if the traders don’t see us.”

Jimmy added, “I don’t plan on being seen. All we want to do at this stage is to be sure that it is the Traders who are stealing diamonites.”

“It has to be them, Jimmy,” Zepher said. “The only visitors I have ever seen in Lithania are you and the Traders.”

“It is still possible that it could be someone else. When I first visited Lithania it was because of a boy named Anthony. He was searching the upper levels for his lost dog, Bozo. So, quite by accident Anthony almost stumbled into your world. If he did then it must be possible for others to make the same accidental discovery.”

“I suppose anything is possible, Jimmy,” Zepher agreed, “But it is still taking quite a risk following the Traders. Are you sure you want to take that risk?”

*“Of course we are,” chimed in Gemma.

“And as far as we know,” added Geldus, “the Traders have never shown any signs of violence before now.”

“It’s settled, then. Jimmy and I will follow the Traders after the bartering session tomorrow’ Gemma said.

“ And,” continued Jimmy, ”if we discover that they are taking diamonites we’ll report back to you here in Council before dinner.”

Zepher interrupted. “Talking of dinner, Jimmy, I think everyone would welcome some hot food. It should almost be ready by now.”

And that was the end of serious conversations for the rest of the evening. Jade and the twins returned to the gathering just as the main course was finished. “You timed that just right, Jade,” Max said with a laugh. “Just in time for some fruit, before bedtime.”

“It’s too early for bed, daddy,” objected Jade. “We’re still on holiday.”

“Of course you are,” Zeea said. “Daddy’s just winding you up. Take no notice.”

“Thanks, mum.”

Another hour or so passed and then it was time for the Zapheer family to return to their respective homes. Gemma joined Zeea and Jade ready to set off on their way to their home cave.

“See you all in the morning, after breakfast,” shouted Jimmy.

“You’ve forgotten, Jimmy,” Geldus replied. “Iris and I are taking the children out for the day. We’ll probably go sailing again. We’ll all meet up for dinner tomorrow evening .”

“I’ll be back, in the morning with Zeea and Max,” said Gemma. “We’ll be in plenty of time to keep an eye on the Traders.”

“Goodnight all,” was Jimmy’s parting call, as he turned, to return to the guest quarters in Zepher’s residence. “Goodnight Rubia and thanks for inviting me to stay with you and Zepher.”

Jimmy was too well mannered to point out that the rooms in the Council

Chambers were much more spacious than the rather small rooms in the ordinary Diamite's cave dwellings. Sleeping in the largest bedroom in the guest quarters, Jimmy's feet still hung over the end of the bed.

Chapter 23

The Traders Capture Gemma

Jimmy and Gemma were hidden behind the columns in the Great Hall. The Traders had unloaded the three Sleds which carried the goods that were to be exchanged for cleaned diamonites. They wore coarse woven, loose-fitting, woollen coats over close-fitting singlets of blue cotton, with greyish, tight trousers. They had unloaded and stacked the timbers. The various bundles of soft

materials were sorted and laid across several tables into piles of silk, cotton and wool. Sacks of grain were deposited in separate stacks for corn and wheat and barley.

The items the Traders brought were goods that the Diamites could not make for themselves. The trading had been going on for many many years and there were agreed weights for diamonites in exchange for the different goods. There was some minor bartering when the traders said they brought superior quality items, compared to their usual offerings. It was left to Councilmember Zirco to reach the final agreed price when there was a dispute. But by and large, the trading proceeded smoothly with no major disagreements. At last, they concluded the morning 's business. The three Trader's helpers replaced their outer coats and Zepher handed over the list of items they required from the traders on their next visit. Typically that would be on an agreed day, convenient for both parties, usually about in four to six weeks.

Aaron, the head Trader, shook hands with Zepher and Zirco and accepted the large bag of cleaned and graded diamonites in payment. Aaron's second in command was Midras and he slung the bag of diamonites over his shoulder. Traders did not need to check that they were paid the agreed quantity of diamonites because they knew the Diamites would never cheat on them.

"Goodbye, friends," said Aaron. "Well see you again soon." And with a friendly wave from Midras, they began to retrace their steps back to their ship, following the Trader's three workers who pulled the empty Sleds back through the tunnels.

"Are you ready?" Jimmy asked Gemma.

"Raring to go," responded Gemma.

“Just be careful, you two,” warned Zeea. “We don’t want you to get into trouble for following them.”

“We’ll keep well out of sight, Zeea,” Jimmy assured her. “The sleds make so much noise we’ll be able to hang back and just follow the noise.”

Gemma was becoming impatient. “Come on, Jimmy. We don’t want to let them get too far ahead. I want to see if it’s them that are taking extra diamonites out of the tunnels.”

And so they began their furtive tracking of the Traders. They followed a different route to the one they had taken with Geldus, Iris and the children. The Traders had found a way that led directly to the lake in the Rainbow cavern without needing to use the river. A journey which had taken Jimmy and Gemma almost three hours was covered by the Traders in one hour.

Aaron and Midras led the empty sleds straight past the tunnel where the diamonites had been chipped away.

“They’re not going to take any diamonites,” Gemma said. “But who else could be stealing them.”

“Let’s just see what they do next,” Jimmy said.

The sleds were dragged across the rocky cavern floor right up to the side of their ship. The mane plate showed the vessel was named Raven. The ship was at anchor, hardly moving. A hoist was swung over the ship’s side and the three sleds were pulled back aboard, one at a time, and securely tied down on the deck. Then the traders climbed the gangplank and disappeared into the ship’s hold.

“What do we do now, Jimmy,” asked Gemma.

“I must say, I don’t know. Let’s wait and see what happens. Once they weigh anchor we’ll have to think again about who can be taking the diamonites.”

It must have around a long hour later that Jimmy said, “Look. Someone is coming down the gangplank, now. It looks like there are two of them carrying hammers and chisels and sacks, They’re heading to the tunnel where all the loose chipping are. Quick, Gemma, hide. One of them is coming this way.”

“We’re going to have to split up to keep an eye on them,” Gemma said.

“Alright,” agreed Jimmy. “ You keep an eye on the one going that way up and I’ll follow the other. But I don’t think there is any doubt that it’s the Traders who are stealing the diamonites.”

“We’ll have to report back to Zepher and Rubia as soon as we confirm our suspicions.”

Jimmy shadowed the Trader and within a very short time, he was hurriedly chipping diamonites out of the tunnel walls, collecting them in a hessian sack.

Gemma followed the other Trader who had completed a circle to meet up at the start of the tunnel where the trail of loose chippings started. It seemed as if the one she was following was acting as a lookout for the one who was chipping out the diamonites. The Trader went into the tunnel where there were loose chippings. Gemma followed stealthily. She had not gone more than a few steps in the darkened tunnel when a great hulk of a Trader grabbed her in his strong, hairy arms and lifted her off her feet.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he whispered in her ear while clamping an enormous hand over her mouth. “You’re coming with me,” he said. Gemma’s tiny frame shuddered. It is doubtful if she could have shouted for Jimmy, even if her mouth had been freed. She was frozen in fear. The Trader

threatened, "Not a word if you value your life, young lady. Just keep quiet and you won't get hurt." He bundled the struggling Gemma into a hessian sack and headed back towards the ship.

Jimmy had watched the Trader fill two sacks with roughly hewn diamonites and he danced ahead of him as he returned to their ship. Jimmy reached the edge of the rainbow lake and hid again behind the fallen boulders. They passed so closely to his hiding place that they could have touched him if they had noticed. But they were intent of getting their haul of diamonites back to the ship as quickly as they could. They marched purposely up the gangplank and retrieved it behind them, then stowed it alongside the ship's rails with a twist of rope. The sacks were carried below deck.

The Traders were getting ready to up anchor, but there were no signs of Gemma returning to Jimmy's side. The sails were unfurled even though there was only a slight breeze. What little wind there was blowing directly towards the end of the Rainbow Lake where the ship had been moored. Then, as Jimmy watched, two sets of oversized oars were slotted between the ship's rails, with each oar being handled by two crew members and they were worked in unison. Slowly driving the Raven forward until it gathered pace.

The Traders were leaving but Jimmy felt that he couldn't follow them from the shore until he had found Gemma. Within minutes Jimmy had completed a full circle tracing the route he and Gemma had taken to spy on the Traders. His red Attalian boots allowed him to skim over the ground at a breakneck pace but he found no trace of Gemma. She would not have returned to the Council without telling Jimmy. There was only one possible reason for Gemma not being at his side. She had been captured by the Traders. At the edge of the Rainbow Lake,

Jimmy cupped his hands over his mouth and shouted at the top of his voice.

“Gemma! Gemma! Where are you?”

Gemma heard Jimmy’s cries and responded as loudly as she could, but her voice was muffled by the sack in which she had been carried aboard. She had been dumped into the ship’s hold and was hemmed in by stout timbers.

‘I’m a prisoner on board the ship,’ came her almost inaudible reply. But Jimmy’s ears were as special as the rest of him. He had Attalian ears and could hear the slightest sound when he was concentrating. He heard Gemma’s voice as clearly as if she had been standing next to him. Jimmy didn’t want to attract the attention of the Traders so he sent a silent message in his mind, ‘Don’t worry, Gemma. I’ll get you out, somehow.’ Jimmy just hoped that Gemma received his ‘thought’ message.

There was little Jimmy could do other than to follow the slow progress of the ship from the safety of the shoreline. Once the ship had picked up its pace a little more, the sails began to flutter in the strengthening breeze and soon the ship was tacking first left and then right directly into the breeze making progress with a series of zig-zagging manoeuvres. Jimmy followed the ship’s progress from the shoreline and followed from a distance. Then the oars were shipped and stored and the ship made steady progress. Jimmy was not a strong swimmer and he didn’t think he could swim alongside. His only hope was that the ship might once tack just close enough to the shoreline that he might be able to take a run and jump on board. But that did not happen and the shoreline was becoming progressively narrower. Within the space of a few more meters, the shoreline petered out. The lake now spanned the cave wall to wall.

Jimmy had no choice but to give up on the chase. He was despondent. How could he have allowed his very best friend to be kidnapped? Why had he got involved with the unscrupulous Traders? Why should the friends be risking their lives for people they had just met?

Well! The last was the easiest to answer. Gemma felt that she had no choice but to try and help her long lost, newfound family. She was better equipped than any of her kin to take on the challenge of facing the Traders. She had developed her skills by accompanying Jimmy on many of his adventures in Roombelow. Gemma was fearless and would defend the world of her nieces and nephew to the end. They were her family who she had only discovered in the last few days. Nothing would stop her from defending the lives of her family. Nothing, that is, except the strength of two normal-sized Traders who had picked up the pint-sized Diamite and thrown her into a sack as if she were a bag of feathers.

As far as Jimmy was concerned, he too had no option. He had grown in stature and understanding each time he overcame a new challenge and new challenges seemed to come his way at every turn in the road. Jimmy's Attalian roots gave him a flying start over the ordinary, everyday folk he lived with. And he did have some special Attalian powers but he was not a superboy version of normality. It took real courage and determination to overcome the problems that life threw at him. The same courage that Jimmy had fallen back on to overcome the bullying of the past served him well to face whatever challenges came his way. Some might say that he had had a lot of assistance from the magic woven by Witch Matilda. They would be right! Jimmy and Matilda had become the greatest of friends during his stay in Roombelow with the Mayor, Mr McDonald. Jimmy and Gemma were given free rein in Matilda's house on the hill. Matilda's

magic could help but it was the courage that grew inside Jimmy's heart that made him so brave.

Jimmy could not follow the Trader's ship. Its sails began to fill with the breeze and it became a dot on the edge of his vision. He had no other option but to report back to the head of Council, Zepher and Rubia.

"I'm so sorry," Jimmy said to Gemma's brother and sister. "I followed on foot as far as I could but then there was no shoreline left to walk on. The lake filled the canyon from wall to wall. I had no option but to come back to you."

"We'll drag a canoe up to the edge of the lake and give chase," Gemma's brother, Geldus said. "Come on. We are wasting time talking while all the while Gemma is being taken further and further away from us."

"That's not going to help, said Jimmy with a downcast face. "Sadly, it will take far too long to drag a canoe to the lake and then give chase to a sailing ship that has the wind in its sails. I remember that the Traders said they sailed for one day on the lake and before that, they were under a sky, on rolling seas, for a further day. But that was with a full load of goods for the Diamites. They are returning home with an almost empty vessel. It will be much faster."

"But you have to do something to get Gemma back," pleaded Zeea, Gemma's sister.

"Uncle Jimmy," cried Jade, "You have to save her. Please. Please. Go after her. Bring Auntie Gemma home. We've only just started to get to know her."

The chorus was added to by the pleadings of Zach and Rachel.

"I don't know where to start," Jimmy said. "Once their ship clears the lake there is an open sea. They could sail off in any direction. We need some special help and I know just where to find it."

“Where, Jimmy?” asked Zepher intriguingly.

“I have to go back to Roombelow,” Jimmy explained. I can travel there and back within a few hours. I’ll be much quicker than when I brought Gemma to you. My Attalian boots will get me back to see Matilda in a trice.”

“Matilda?” queried doubtful Zepher.

“I don’t have time to explain,” Jimmy said. “Matilda is a good witch with lots of friends, and I know she can help. I have to go now. There’s no time to waste.”

Jimmy ignored the rest of their questions, he simply took flight and disappeared into the honeycomb of passages that linked up the caverns in the land of Lithania. Jimmy began the descent of the cliffside which would take him back to Roombelow.

Chapter 24

A Plan to Rescue Gemma

Jimmy had explained to Mr McDonald the reasons for the unexpected return from his trip to visit Gemma and the Diamites. The Mayor of Roombelow agreed. Whatever it took, Gemma had to be rescued from the clutches of the Traders.

Jimmy needed help. His friend, Witch Matilda, was sure to know how best to trace Gemma's location. Jimmy sat opposite Matilda at her kitchen table staring into her crystal ball. Matilda used the crystal ball to keep in touch with her network of witch friends. The faces of her many witch coven associates, all friends really, appeared in the crystal ball as each, in turn, checked in with Matilda following her call for assistance. The one witch she needed most was the last witch to answer her call.

"Ellwin, where have you been? We have an emergency and it seems you may be the only one able to help us."

"Whatever is wrong?" Ellwin asked. "You've called me away from a very important meeting of all the world's water sprites."

Jimmy quickly explained: "Gemma has been kidnapped by the Traders who visit the land of Lithania, the home of the Diamites. They carried her away in a sailing ship, the Raven, across an underground lake that empties into an enormous ocean. I didn't have a boat and I couldn't follow them on foot. We need to know where they are taking her."

Ellwin knew all about Roombelow because anywhere, where there was water, was part of her domain of influence. “Ellwin, I need to know where they are taking Gemma. By the time we can get a boat across the rainbow lake their sailing ship will be beyond my sight.”

“You say the Raven set sail from the rainbow lake in Lithania. I know it well. What do you want me to do? I cannot stop the mortals. My magic is not that powerful.”

“All we need, Ellwin, is for you to tell us where their ship, docks.”

“I’ll be back in a trice,” Ellwin warbled before she disappeared from view.

“It’s all very well knowing where they are taking Gemma,” said Matilda, “But how is that going to help rescue her?”

“I’ll worry about that once I know where she is,” Jimmy replied.

“There’s nothing to be done until Ellwin gets back so you had better get something to eat before your return to Lithania.”

Jimmy had hardly finished the fishy sandwich that Matilda prepared for him before Ellwin reappeared in the crystal ball.

“I’m back,” she announced.

“Did you find them?” pleaded Jimmy.

“Of course I did, Jimmy. As long as they are on water I can find them. They had left the Rainbow Lake and were still sailing on the Western Ocean, as it is called. They are heading to anchor the Raven in a harbour at the southern edge of land known as Ozmidium, on a direct northern course. There is no other port nearby they could land in. The harbour lies in a hollow between the mountains that rise up behind the town known as Ogton.”

“Thanks, Ellwin, and sorry about pulling you away from your meeting,” Matilda offered apologetically. “We greatly appreciate what you have done for us.”

“Perhaps I can be of a little more assistance,” Ellwin offered. “I want to give Jimmy a symbol of the power that I do have over the waters. Take this, Jimmy.” And she handed Jimmy a shimmering blue belt that rose out from the very depths of the crystal ball. “It will keep you safe whenever you are on the water, and if you twist the belt buckle to the right the waters will rise and screen you all around. You will be able to move around as if you were invisible. Furthermore, you will be able to call me if you are wearing this belt.”

“Thank you, Ellwin. That is a wonderful gift.”

“Jimmy, any friend of Matilda’s is a friend of mine, but the belt is a loan, not a gift. Now I really must get back to the meeting. See you all again sometime when I can spend more time with you and your friends. Bye, for now.”

And the glow of the crystal ball dimmed.

“I think you have all the help we can give you, Jimmy,” said Matilda.

“Thanks, Matilda. All I need now is a compass to plot a course north. I have seen Mr McDonald using a pocket-sized compass in a leather case. I know he will allow me to borrow it so that once I get to the Western Ocean I can set off in the right direction.”

Of course, there was no problem and Jimmy said his goodbyes to Mr McDonald and Amanda, who hugged him tightly before he set off on his return journey to Lithania.

Thanks to the speed with which he could cover the ground in his red Attalian boots, in no time at all Jimmy was scaling the cliffside that led from

Roombelow into Lithania, the land of the Diamites. A few moments later he was reporting to Zepher, head of Council, and Rubia, his wife, as well as the gathered clan of the Zapheer family. He explained that he urgently needed a boat with a sail so that he could pursue the Traders ship.

“We only have canoes with paddles,” explained Geldus, Gemma’s brother and leader of the Zapheer clan. “Well then,” Jimmy said, “you will have to design one pretty quickly if we want to rescue Gemma.”

“Of course we want to get Gemma back but we don’t have a magic wand to create one out of thin air,” an exasperated Zeea joined in the discussion.

“Sometimes,” Jimmy said, “you just have to create your own magic. With hard work. And the longer it takes the further away the Traders take Gemma. So come on. You have to build a sail on a boom that will fit onto your largest canoe.”

“You’ve seen our boats, Jimmy,” Max offered. “They are all lightweight, built to travel on the rivers in Lithania. They are not strong enough for a sea journey and as there is no wind in Lithania we have never used sails.”

“Wait!,” commanded Zepher. “There is one craft bigger and stronger than all the canoes. It is the Council State Barge. It won’t take long to fit a simple sail if we get straight to work now. In the meanwhile, we can start to drag the Barge up to the Rainbow Lake. We’ll pull it uphill over wooden rollers where we have to. Meanwhile, we can ask the tailors to find a piece of strong cloth to make up a sail. They will be able to cut and shape it and there is a good stock of hemp ropes to choose from. Now we have a plan let’s get going.”

Once the plan was laid the execution proceeded at full pace. It was just assumed by all that it would be Jimmy who went to the rescue of Gemma. Jimmy assured Gemma’s nieces and nephew that all would be well. He had a special

word for the youngest, Jade. "You don't have to worry anymore, Jade. Everyone is working hard to bring back Aunt Gemma just as soon as possible."

"I know, Uncle Jimmy," she said, calling him by his appointed title, "but will there only be you chasing the Traders across the sea."

Jade's father, Max answered Jade. "Uncle Jimmy will not be on his own, Jade. I am going too."

There was a sharp intake of breath by Jimmy. "Don't argue Jimmy," Max said. "You will need help to cross the Western sea. You won't be able to steer and set the sails at the same time."

Secretly Jimmy was so pleased that he would have Max alongside him to help. Despite showing a brave face Jimmy was really worried about chasing the Traders. Max was a lot shorter than Jimmy, as were all Diamites, but he was very strong for his size. "Thanks, Max," Jimmy acknowledged and silently and gratefully accepted the offer of assistance. Although Jimmy had a wonderful mind, far in advance of all his family of friends, there were limitations to his abilities. He was no Superman. He was taller than all the Diamites but he was never disrespectful of the people he met in Roombelow or Lithania nor any other world he visited. With every adventure, his abilities expanded exponentially.

Within the space of a few hours the Council Barge, loaded with several day's supplies, was manhandled over the rollers, time and time again until it could be launched into the great Rainbow lake. It had been decided that four canoes would be rigged to pull the barge renamed Celsius until the breeze was strong enough to fill her sail. The sky blue, single, triangular cut sail hung from a wide boom and could be raised or lowered on jute ropes, coiled in the belly of their converted ceremonial barge now a great sailing ship. The Diamites had cut,

fashioned and fitted a large rudder over the rail at the stern to steer Celsius over the sea. And with a last wave to the many assembled Diamites, Jimmy and Max began their voyage to recover Gemma. The four canoes dropped and recovered their pulling lines as soon as Celsius began to scoop up the breeze into its billowing sail.

Their craft sped through the waters of the lake. Jimmy and Max sat at the stern and their craft almost guided itself over the lake's surface because the breeze was now steady and always in the same direction.

"How long will we have to sail before we reach the sea?" Max asked.

"The Traders said they sailed on the lake for a day before they reached the sea. Once on the sea, they said there was at least one further day's sailing, depending on wind and waves, before they reached their port," answered Jimmy.

Jimmy had spent some time trying to explain to Max what a sea was. Max, like all the Diamites, had never left Lithania's subterranean world of rivers and lakes. Max was in awe at the thought of great winds driving waves of water that could rise taller than anything he had ever imagined. Or, on a fine day, the waves could roll in on gentle swells.

"But how will we find their port if their ocean is as great as they say?"

"Witch Ellwin gave me directions that will help us find them, once we reach the sea. Don't worry Max, Witch Ellwin also gave me this blue belt to help us and I've got a compass to set our heading, due North after we leave Lithania. So you can relax. We are making excellent progress and we will probably reach the sea before nightfall."

"What do you think we should do then?" Max questioned. "Heave to, stow the sail and wait until morning light?"

“I don’t think we can afford to wait for morning. We have no idea where the Traders are headed when they leave their ship. Who knows where Gemma will end up. No, Max. I think we have to keep sailing, providing there is a fair wind.”

“How will we know what direction to take?”

Max did not understand the concept of a compass. “We will follow the direction the magnetic needle points to for North. That’s what the compass is for.”

Max would never get his head around the concept of compass points but he could see that Jimmy was confident and seemed to know what he was talking about. “OK, Jimmy. We sail on, in the dark.”

Jimmy smiled inwardly but it was obvious that Max trusted Jimmy’s judgment. And they sailed on.

Suddenly, everything turned black. The diamonites glittering in the ceiling were left behind. Max was horrified that the space above his head was no longer illuminated. Then the clouds parted and starlight shone through. “So there are diamonites in this land too,” Max said with relief. Rather than get into a long discussion about the nature of stars Jimmy said, “Yes there is, Max, but they are spread more unevenly than in Lithania. In this world, the stars sometimes appear clumped together and sometimes they are spread far apart and some shine brighter than others.”

“But there is one enormous star over there, Jimmy, and it is shining brighter than all than others.”

“That’s not a star. It is much closer to us than the stars. That is the moon and it moves across the sky during the night.”

Max was fascinated. He had never before seen a sky. He marvelled at the vastness and the fact that there were no rock wall limitations to his field of view.

Onward they sailed and the wind and the waves were kind. They hardly had to make any course corrections and the wind blew them on towards the port of Ogton. The balmy conditions allowed each to take a nap between taking turns at the tiller. Dawn broke over a calm sea bathed in the golden light of sunrise and it was all Max could do to stop his jaw-dropping open in astonishment at the beauty unfolding before him.

Jimmy was more interested in the horizon and the appearance of twin mountain peaks directly ahead. They were close to the town of Ogton, where Ellwin said the Traders had taken Gemma. There was hope and trepidation in equal measure as their boat sailed closer and closer to their abducted friend.

Chapter 25

In Pursuit

The morning's breeze blew their vessel, 'Celsius', steadily across the gently rolling waves, directly north toward the Ozmidium mountain peaks. There was no need to tack to maintain their direction, just a light touch to the tiller kept them on course. Their sail billowed and the wind never changed direction. The sun slowly rose higher into the sky.

"I can feel the warmth on my face and my arms," Max said to Jimmy. "Where does the heat come from?" he asked.

"The sun is the source of the light and that's where the heat comes from," explained Jimmy. "And as the sun rises higher in the sky it gets warmer, even hotter."

"So," Max continued, "the sun moves over the sky like the moon we saw during the night."

"That's right, Max."

"What a wonderful world this is. It's so full of light and warmth. It's completely different from Lithania."

"There are lots of different worlds outside of Lithania but there are not many places as happy and as peaceful as your world, Max."

"But now that I have seen this I want to see more, Jimmy."

“And I’m sure you will before this mission to save Gemma is over.”

They were drawing closer to the coastline and the twin mountain peaks were clearly visible. The port of Ogton snuggled between the peaks.

“Why are the mountain tops white?” asked Max.

“That’s because they’re covered in snow,” Jimmy explained. It was all too much for Max to take in. Jimmy had told him about the mountains, which Max had never seen before, and now he had to explain about snow. “This is beyond comprehension,” Max said.

“Let’s not worry too much about that. We’re here to find Gemma. We’re getting closer to Ogton and we don’t have a plan. Think, Max. What are we going to do when we find the Trader’s ship?”

“I don’t think the Traders will still be onboard. They have too much of a lead over us. Can we search the town for them?”

“The problem with that is two-fold. First, you will stand out because of your size. You’re much smaller than me and the Trader’s people. And, secondly, I am a little bit different myself. There are no traders with red hair, large pointed ears and enormous feet. If Gemma is not on board their ship we will have serious trouble trying to find her.”

“We’ll just have to dock beside their ship and wait for nightfall before we start our search.”

“I can use Witch Ellwin’s gift to hide us from view while we are on water. She said all I had to do was twist the buckle on this belt.”

“It might be a good idea to try it out before we get to the harbour, just to be sure it works?”

“Here goes, then,” Jimmy said as he twisted the buckle on his blue belt.”

The sea around the Celsius seemed to bubble and boil. A mist rose around the converted Council barge. Jimmy and Max could see through the curtain of vapour but they were screened from the outsider's view. "Well," gasped Max, "I think that proves that it works very well. But of course, it's not going to help us if we have to go beyond the harbour."

"Let's just see what happens when we get there," suggested Jimmy.

What neither of them knew at that time was that Ellwin's magic was much more powerful than ever they thought. Not only did the mist screen them from view it made them totally invisible. It is a well known scientific fact that a beam of light bends when it meets water. It's something called refraction. That's what makes rainbows in the sky. But Ellwin's spell caused beams of light to bend around their ship and then to meet up again on the other side. The only other force in the universe that could bend light as much as that was a black hole. The energy the black hole needed to do that was enormous but somehow Witch Ellwin had found a piece of magic that obeyed the force hidden in the magic blue belt that Jimmy was now wearing around his waist. Somehow Ellwin was working with the Laws of Physics to create a hole full of invisibility, with Jimmy, Max and their ship caught in the middle.

The sun has risen to be almost directly overhead. There was hardly a cloud in the sky. Their ship was getting closer to the harbour entrance when Max gave a low moan. "Jimmy, what is happening to me? I'm burning all over. My arms and my head are on fire."

"Max, you must be getting burned by the sun. Your skin has never been exposed to sunlight before. I have just realised that all the Diamites have pale skin. Because you live in caves your skin has not developed any no natural

protection. You don't get a tan the same as I do and Gemma will be affected just like you."

"What can I do?" Max pleaded.

"Cover-up, with your cloak," Jimmy said, "and I'll activate the screening sea mist."

Jimmy turned the buckle on the blue belt the sea mist rose and encircled their craft but there was left a gaping hole directly above them. The sun continued to beat down on them. "There's nothing else to do, Max. You'll just have to stay undercover while the sun is so high in the sky. I do hope Gemma has some cover too."

They were drawing closer to the Ogton harbour. Inside the two overlapping curved harbour walls, there was a gap which gave entrance to the sheltered harbour. There were three ships tied up, sails were stowed. They were tethered by thick ropes to large metal rings both fore and aft. Two more vessels swung on their anchor ropes in the centre pool of the harbour. On the tiller, Jimmy directed their ship towards the gap in the harbour walls. Just as they passed into the entrance, with Max holding the tiller steady, Jimmy collapsed the sail into the keel of their boat. Forward movement slowed but their glide towards the harbour wall continued. Jimmy reached for the grappling hook to stop Celsius from hitting the enormous stones from which the wall was constructed. Jimmy was able to slow their boat sufficiently that they did not crash into the wall. He swung Celsius around to face the harbour entrance and managed to tie a loop of rope through a vacant mooring ring.

Seamen were working on the dockside. Some were fishermen mending nets. Others were stacking boxes as they unloaded the cargo from one of the

tied-up vessels. But no one gave a glance towards the Celsius. The mist continued to shroud their ship in an invisible envelope.

“Max, there’s the Traders ship. I don’t see anyone working on it.”

“That’s not so surprising. They returned to Ozmidium with an empty hold. The diamonites we pay them can easily be carried in a single sack and I don’t think they would have been able to chip out any more than a single sackful of stolen gems in the short time they were there. ”How can we possibly search for them?” Max asked. “We both stick out like sore thumbs. I am so small compared to the Traders they’ll spot me straight away and although you are closer to their size your bright red hair is like a beacon. And as soon as you leave the Celsius the magic cloak will disappear. We’ll be left bobbing on the water like sitting ducks.”

“Perhaps if I take off the blue belt and leave it on board with you the cloak of invisibility will stay in place.”

“But that means you will be searching on your own, Jimmy. As long as that sun is shining I dare not risk burning my skin anymore. My skin is still burning.”

“That’s fine Max but let’s check out that the belt will work on its own first.” Jimmy took off Witch Ellwin’s blue belt and hung it over the tiller. As he did he slung it over the tiller he hit the belt against the wooden spar and the centre of the buckle fell out onto the deck. “Look. It comes apart and the screen of mist is still in place. I can leave the centrepiece with you and still wear the magic belt.” After checking that there was no activity on the quayside Jimmy climbed the rope that hung down from iron mooring rings. Once he reached the quayside he turned around. Celsius was still completely shrouded from view.

Jimmy returned to the deck of Celsius. "Now we know the shroud will stay in place I can search for Gemma and you'll be safely hidden from view. And more to the point the sun has moved through the sky and is no longer directly overhead. You'll be out of the sun's rays. You won't get burned any more."

"Thank goodness," Max heaved a sigh as he unwrapped himself from his cloak. "Be careful Jimmy. If you shout I'll come running."

"Only if you're protected from the sun. Otherwise, wait until the sun sinks behind the mountains."

"Jimmy, take my hat. It will hide that bright red mop of hair and perhaps you won't be recognised as an outsider." And with that, Jimmy was gone. Up and over the quayside he headed towards the cottages that lined the harbour, over the cobbled roadway.

There were more movements now both onboard the moored ships and also on the quay. A few men were stacking empty boxes and lobster pots. There was one woman, sat on a stool, mending fishing nets which were hung over lines. Near the centre of the crescent of cottages, there was a market square where there were rows of wooden trestle tables some with sailcloth roofing. There were only a few goods on display, for sale, but it certainly seemed to Jimmy, that this was the home turf of the Traders. Jimmy skirted around the trestles looking for any sign of Gemma or the stolen diamonites or the Traders. He wasn't worried about being captured because he was wearing his red Attalian boots.

No one took any notice of the boy walking around the harbour houses but Jimmy could neither see nor hear anything that could be a sign of Gemma nor the Traders he had met in Lithania. More and more people were walking around the town. The town and the market had become quite busy. Fishermen opened

some of the boxes they had stacked on the quayside and displayed their catch of fish on the trestle tables. Buyers were lined up to buy fresh fish and crabs. Others were buying fresh bread. There was even a stall selling fresh milk. And then Jimmy saw the two Traders who had handled the exchange of goods with the Diamites in Lithania. He racked his brains to remember their names. The senior figure was Aaron and then he recalled the name of the second in command. He was Midras. Both had appeared to be very friendly during their visit to Lithania. They had seemed to be fair traders and yet they had kidnapped Gemma. But where was she? Jimmy could only wonder.

The Traders were standing at a market stall of their own. Jimmy sidled up to them as close to them as he dared. He did not want to be recognised. It was obvious from their conversations with the people who were selling goods to them that they were buying fresh supplies to replenish stocks on board their ship. Jimmy now recognised their ship, tied up at the wharf side with just one vessel between them and the hidden Celsius. It seemed that they had already loaded quite a lot of supplies into the ship's hold. They might be sailing off quite soon. But where was Gemma?

"Hi there, youngster," hailed Midras. "What have you got to sell to us? We're always on the lookout for a bargain buy."

"Leave the boy alone, Midras. He's not doing any harm," Aaron called out.

"Just teasing, Aaron. Not going to hurt him. Anyway, young man, what are you doing hanging around the market?"

"Just looking for a friend," Jimmy said. "A small lady in a green suit. Might you have seen her."

“Not seen anyone like that around here,” Aaron said. “But I have seen a lot of small people in green tunics and trousers. Not here, mind you, but in a faraway land.”

By then the Trader’s interest was piqued. He looked more closely at Jimmy. “I think I’ve met you before,” Aaron said. “Take off that hat. I’m sure you’re the lad with bright red hair from Lithania. What are you doing here?”

Jimmy took off his hat. “We didn’t get to meet but I was with the Diamites during your last visit to Lithania,” Jimm said. “Perhaps you saw me in the Council chambers.”

“That’s it. I recall seeing you and a young lady moving around between the pillars in the Council Hall.”

“We were trying to stay out of sight,” Jimmy said. “We followed you back to your ship after the trading.”

“But why follow us?” Midras asked.

“We were certain you were taking more diamonites than you traded for.”

“Never,” objected Midras. “We get a good deal from the Diamites. There’s no way we would steal from them. That is a very serious accusation, young man. Please, let us sit down and talk this through.”

When Midras and Jimmy were sat at a nearby empty table with a mug of hot tea in their hands, he called for his friend. Aaron. Soon all three were gathered. “This young man has followed us from Lithania, somehow, and believes we have taken more diamonites than we traded for.”

“We would never do that, Jimmy, Aaron said. “Our reputation depends on us being fair. We trade in so many different lands. Not just in Lithania. We

supply whatever other tribes need. What they cannot grow or mine for themselves.”

“What is even more important, Aaron is that Gemma, one of the Diamites, disappeared when you returned to your ship – after chipping out a sackful of diamonites from the tunnel walls.”

“I’m not sure we can you help with the missing Gemma but I can assure you we did not take anymore diamonites than the head of Council paid us for the goods we delivered.”

By that time the sun had moved across the sky and hidden behind one of the twin mountain peaks. “Give me a moment,” Jimmy said and I’ll bring another friend who will confirm what we saw.”

“Please do,” Aaron said. “We have to get to the bottom of this misunderstanding.”

Jimmy stood up from the table and Aaron watched Jimmy walk down to the wharf. The Traders were amazed when it seemed he disappeared. But a moment or two later he reappeared, helping his friend, Max, up onto the walkway. “Where did he come from?” Midras asked, in amazement.

“You’ll have to ask Jimmy. I don’t know, Mldras.”

Jimmy led Max back to the table and asked for a drink for his friend. Max was still covered from head to toe in his cloak. “I think you can shed the cloak while the sun is behind the mountain,” Jimmy said, “But keep it over your shoulder. Just in case.”

“Just in case of what?” asked Aaron.

“The Diamites have never been exposed to sunshine, before. Their skin burns quickly when the sun shines.”

“Of course,” Midras said. “The Diamites live out their lives in an underground warren of caves. The only light they see is whatever is provided by their wonderful diamonites.”

“Let’s try to sort this out like the friends we are. We do not rob our friends,” Aaron added.

“That is difficult to believe,” Jimmy said, “when we actually watched you carry away diamonites that had been chipped out of the tunnel walls, but even more importantly, Gemma was bundled into a sack. We followed you back to your ship.”

“I don’t know who you followed but it certainly was not one of the traders.”

Aaron and Midras eventually persuaded Jimmy and Max that they were telling the truth. They did not take the diamonites nor did they kidnap Gemma.

Chapter 26

Imprisoned on a Mountain

"I hope we have now established that we, The Traders, do not rob our customers," Aaron said. "Now, tell us how did you come to that conclusion."

"Gemma and I watched as two Traders left your ship after you had loaded the sack of diamonites. We split up to follow them. When they returned to the ship they carried two sacks. One had diamonites in it and Gemma was bundled into the other. As soon as they returned to the ship they upped anchor and began to sail away across the Rainbow Lake. I tried to keep up with them but I couldn't follow. I had no option but to return to my home village, Roombelow, to ask my witch friends for help."

"You have witch friends?" asked Aaron, almost unbelieving.

"Yes. We do have a lot of help from witches but we sailed here ourselves. Witch Ellwin provided the magic to hide our ship from view," explained Max.

"That's not helping us to find Gemma," interrupted Jimmy. "Two Traders took her onboard your ship and we followed you here. Where is Gemma now?"

"Jimmy," said Aaron, "we are going to do everything we possibly can to find your friend. Let's all go onboard the Raven and question our crew."

Jimmy and Max followed Aaron and Midras up the gangway onto the top deck. Of the Raven and Midras called for the rest of the crew to come topside.

Two deckhands climbed up onto the deck looking rather confused. "What's the trouble, Aaron?" one of them asked.

"Is there only the two of you on board," queried Midras. "Where's Jaz and Karl?"

"They left early this morning," answered Jason, supposedly the senior crew member. "Said they had to get back to their home village in the mountains. Said they'd be back soon to help with cargo loading before our next sailing."

"What did they take with them?" Aaron asked.

"I asked them the same," said Jaz. "They had two sacks but one of them was moving like they had an animal wriggling about in it. Said it was a fresh rabbit, for the pot. ' Bit bigger than a rabbit if you asked me. Anyway, I told them they had to be back before we sail again. He said 'no problem'."

"Well," said Midras, "it looks like it's turning into a right old problem now and we need to sort it out quick before we can go on to our next port for a new trade."

"His home is in Crighton. That's a small village about half a days hike up the mountain trail."

"Yes," replied Karl, the other of the two crewmen, "but it's easy-going."

"Time we were on our way, then," Max said from beneath the cover of his cloak.

"Why go looking for them?" Jason asked. "They'll be back soon."

Max answered, "We can't wait 'til then. Goodness knows what they intend to do with Gemma. If they've taken her to their home village it is not very likely that they intend to bring her back tomorrow."

"What can they possibly do with her?" Aaron queried.

Max answered. "Gemma is a tiny lady in this land of giants."

"We're not giants," objected Midras.

"You are to us from Lithania, you are giants, more than twice our size,"

Max said, beginning to get exasperated with this conversation. "You are the Traders," he continued, "and Traders trade in things other people cannot buy. People from Lithania have never been seen in your world before. Gemma will be a great attraction, something your people will pay good money to ogle."

"Enough of this," shouted Jimmy. "Just point us to the track that leads to Crighton. We have to find Gemma as soon as possible."

Aaron apologised. "Sorry, Jimmy. Of course, you are right. Let me show you the way. We have so much work to do loading for our next trading trip that we cannot spare the time to help."

"Just set us on the right path," Jimmy said. "We'll manage on our own after that."

With that, Aaron led the two of them through the narrow village streets to the bottom of the second mountain on the right. "That's the track," he said, "which leads directly to Crighton. All the houses, well, there's only a few, are different colours. Karl and Jaz live together with Karl's parents in the house painted blue. You should be able to get Gemma and be back down the mountain long before dark."

Jimmy and Max set off on the track up the mountain leaving the crew of the Raven, to continue their preparations for their next trading journey. The track was skirted with rocks and boulders of varying sizes which had been moved to one side to allow a horse and cart sufficient width to pass along the track safely.

Max knew all about the magic of Jimmy's Attalian red boots and suggested Jimmy would be faster if he continued ahead, on his own. Jimmy did not want to leave Max but it was the best idea so that Jimmy could find Gemma as quickly as possible. Jimmy could easily carry Gemma on his shoulders but Max was a head taller than his sister and because of his broad shoulders was a good deal heavier. There was little chance of making fast progress if he carried Max on his shoulders.

"I'll try to find out where Gemma is and then I'll wait for your help to rescue her. Despite being little you are still a strong Lithanian."

"Just go, Jimmy."

Max could hardly follow Jimmy's progress up the mountain track. He was so fast. Max followed on as quickly as he could.

In no time at all Jimmy was standing on the edge of the village of Crighton. The houses were built into the side of the mountain and were painted in the colours of the rainbow. It seemed that no two houses were the same colour. The blue house was in the centre of the row on the right-hand side of the track. To the left, there were boulders and rocks and beyond that, there was a steep drop down the mountainside with the port and its moored sailing vessels just visible through the thin mist. Altogether a wonderful view. The track wended its way further up the mountain but its peak was hidden among the clouds.

Jimmy need a plan, but first, he had to find out where Gemma was being held. Jimmy twitched his rather large pointed ears and concentrated on hearing the slightest of sounds. He could hear the conversations of the families gathered in their homes. Jimmy screened out of his mind all those extraneous sounds and

searched for any sound that Gemma might make. What he heard filled him with a deep dread. He could hear Gemma pleading with her captors to release her.

“My skin is badly burned, “ she said. “You need to let me go free so that I can get back to my family in Lithania. I need medicine to help reduce the pain. My skin is peeling off my face.”

“No way are we letting you go anywhere, young lady. You’re our ticket to a better life and a bigger house down by the harbour,” said Jaz.

“Yeah,” Karl agreed. “We’ll sell you to the circus folk in Lexington. That’s the next big town around the North coast. They’re always on the lookout for new attractions and you’ll be a right curio. You’re nearly as small as the dwarves but you’re much prettier, almost like a real person.”

“I am a real person,” Gemma sobbed. “I’m not a curiosity. You’ve seen Diamites before. You visit with the Traders.”

“Ah,” said Karl, “but this is the first time we’ve had the opportunity to grab one. If you hadn’t come across us getting a few more diamonites out of that tunnel, we would never have had the chance to grab you. That was silly of you, trying to catch us on your own.”

“I wasn’t on my own, “ Gemma cried. “I was with my friend Jimmy and Jimmy will come after you when he realises I’m missing.”

“I’m not worried about that. The Diamites don’t have any ships that can cross the sea. And anyway, by the time he gets here, you’ll be long gone.”

“Look, Karl,” said Jaz, “We’ll have to tie her up until we get back. We have to help the crew load the next cargo. If we go now we’ll get back before dark.”

“OK,” Karl responded. “We’re going to stop off in Lexington tomorrow before we sail on. So, if we bind her up and put a gag in her mouth we’ll be able to smuggle her on board before the rest of the crew arrive.”

Jaz tied Gemma’s arms behind her back and then bound her feet together. “Let’s get going,” he said and Karl checked the knots before they set off down the track to the harbour.

Jimmy, of course, heard their plans and hid behind a boulder when they passed him on their way down the mountain. Then he realised that Max was still on his way up the mountain. He was bound to run into Jaz and Carl. Jimmy had to warn Max. But he also had to rescue Gemma. What a dilemma. Jimmy mind was in a turmoil. He had to take a chance. Surely, he thought, Max will be able to avoid the Traders. They were making enough noise between them that Max would surely hear their approach and take evasive action.

Jimmy was committed. Gemma had to be his priority. He cautiously crept up to the window of the blue house and peered in. Gemma was sat, bound hand and foot, in the nook by the side of the fire. Jimmy waved to attract her attention. She looked up as the shadow from the window crossed over her view. Her heart jumped with joy when she saw through the window that it was Jimmy and he had found her. “Come and get me free, Jimmy,” she shouted. “There no one else here. Karl’s mother went down to the harbour hours ago.”

Jimmy tried turning the front doorknob and pushed but the door was locked. He went back to the window and Gemma motioned with her head to the back of the house. “There’s a back door and I didn’t see anyone lock that.” Jimmy ran around the side of the house and found a side door. There was no back door because the house was built into the side of the mountain. But the side door was

locked too. He went back to the window and Gemma had stood up. She was able to take small jumps over to the window. Jimmy explained that the side door was locked. Gemma hopped over to it and checked it out. It did not have a lock but it carried a wooden bar between angled irons. The bar was too high for her to reach.

Gemma leaned against the front window and explained the problem to Jimmy. Jimmy said, "I'll just have to kick the door open."

"You'll never break the bar, Jimmy. It's a very thick piece of wood and it's too high for me to reach. You'll stand a better chance if you kick the front door just above the handle."

Well, one of Jimmy Crikey's quite strange features were his enormous feet, compared to normal children. All children from the starworld of Attalia were born with over-sized feet, but as they grew up their feet never changed size. When he wore his red boots he could run as fast as the wind. They also held enormous power. With a single swing of his right boot, Jimmy splintered the wood around the lock of the front door and it swung open. He ran in and freed Gemma from the ropes that bound her. She flung her arms around the neck of her best friend and sobbed. "Jimmy, thank you. I am so sore. My skin is peeling off my face and arms."

"We need a cloak to screen you from the sun. You've never been exposed to sunlight before. I guess that was the reason you lived at the bottom of the well in Roombelow. You rarely came to the surface until the heat had gone out of the sky. Here the sun is still high in the sky We need to protect you. Look around Gemma, there has to be something we can use."

"The only thing I can find are the curtains hanging over the window."

Without further ado, Jimmy tore down one side of the green curtains, which just happened to match her green shirt and hose, and slung it over Gemma's head and body. Somehow she had managed to keep a hold of her pointed hat. Together they stepped outside and closed the door as best they could. Just at that same moment, Max came into sight, his cloak flapping around his ankles, jogging towards them up the mountain track. Breathlessly he welcomed Gemma with a firm embrace. "Thank goodness, you're safe," he gasped.

"Jimmy freed me," she answered.

"And now we have to work out how to get back to our ship," Jimmy added.

"At least it's downhill from here to the harbour. I'm not sure I could climb another step," Max said, between deep gulps of air. "I am completely tuckered out."

"The problem will be getting past Jaz and Karl," Jimmy said. "They are going to be very angry when they realise we have taken Gemma from them."

"There's another problem," added Gemma. "Have you seen the way the villagers are looking at us. You made a lot of noise kicking the door in and now they're coming out of their homes to see what is happening. We can't hang around much longer."

"Let's set off down the track now," suggested Max, "before they decide to challenge what we are doing."

"Agreed," Jimmy said. "Let's go. Quickly."

Together the strange trio set off down the mountain track. The two Diamites were covered head to toe to protect them from the afternoon sunlight but as a result, they looked like fugitives, which of course they were. Jimmy had lost his hat when he broke down the door or perhaps when he was untying Gemma, and his red hair shone like a beacon in the sunshine. Initially, Gemma's steps were laboured as her limbs recovered some feeling after being tied up so tightly. Max was just happy that they were headed downhill. The going was much easier going down. Slowly they increased their pace until Jimmy stopped with a sudden start. "Someone is coming up the mountain. Hold on I'll have to tune in my hearing." Jimmy twitched his ears and listened intently. After a moment or two, he relayed the news. "Several villagers are coming up the path and Karl and Jaz are with them. Someone from the village has run down the track and told them about us freeing Gemma."

Gemma gasped. "What do we do now. We'll have to try to hide behind the boulders."

"I think one of us could but all three of us?" Queried Max.

Jimmy agreed. "You're right, Max. I think we have to climb to the top of the mountain looking for another way to get down."

"Oh! No." Max said. "I'll never manage another climb like that, Jimmy. And I'm not sure Gemma is fit enough either."

"Look," Jimmy said. "I don't think we have a choice. There's a crowd of people coming up the track and they will be on top of us in no time at all. Gemma, you climb onto my shoulders, like before and Max, you loop your hand through my belt. I'll help pull you up the track. Now! We have to go."

Chapter 27

Escape

The unlikely looking trio of friends began their climb, up the steep mountain track. They made much faster progress than would have been possible without Jimmy's special powers. His feet moved with such speed that it is doubtful if even a mountain goat would have kept up with them. Max was pulled along effortlessly, his feet barely touched the ground beneath his feet. They passed no further houses and the track narrowed. The top of the mountain was within sight but the track petered out. There was nowhere else to go. There wasn't another track down the mountain. They were trapped and their pursuers were getting closer with every moment.

"Whatever can we do now?" Gemma asked.

"I'm at a bit of a loss, Gemma. Ellwin said the belt would protect me on water but it's not going to be any help on top of a mountain."

"Yes it is," said the voice in Jimmy's head. "I told you as long as you wore my belt I would help you. Just a little way down the mountain, on the left side of the track, there is a spring which becomes a stream that runs down the mountain into the sea beside the harbour. Unfortunately, it's no good following the stream because there is a one hundred meter waterfall halfway down the mountain. You'll never be able to climb down. It's too steep a drop."

"Ellwin, I had no idea I could contact you."

“My reach is limited only by water, and because you are wearing my belt I can follow you anywhere you go, and I have another friend who may be able to help you now.”

“Who is your friend, Ellwin?” Jimmy asked, “We are running out of time.”

“Jimmy,” interrupted Max, “who are you talking to. There’s no one there.”

“Sorry, Max. I’ll try to explain later when we have a little more time.”

Jimmy again turned his attention inward to find Ellwin. “How can you help us, Ellwin? The people chasing us are almost here.”

“Well, first of all, let’s get you hidden from view. If you and your friends sit close together by the side of the spring and hold hands and dip your feet into the water the magic of the belt will still work. That will keep you hidden until I’ve talked to Ira. She oversees the skies of the world.”

“I remember Ira,” Jimmy said. “She was the witch who helped us to find the Weatherman when Roombelow was in danger of flooding.”

Gemma and Max were dumbstruck. Jimmy was talking into thin air. They could not hear the voice. Jimmy jolted them back into the real world and told them, “You need to come with me, quickly. We have to get our feet into the spring water and then hold hands.”

The brother and sister knew Jimmy too well to have any doubts about taking Jimmy’s instructions. He had already demonstrated his strengths to them. Without a backward glance they followed Jimmy’s directions and as soon as they were joined in a circle across the spring Ellwin’s magic began its work. Just like when their ship had been screened with a wall of water vapour a similar barrier rose to above their heads. They became invisible in an instant. Not a moment

too soon, as the villagers, led by Karl and Jaz, ran past the stream where the friends sat by the track with feet dangling into the water.

Jimmy could hear their exasperated shouts when they realised that the friends had disappeared.

“Where can they have gone?” Jaz queried, scratching his head in bemusement. “We can’t have missed them, not with all these helpers.”

“Beats me,” Karl said. “This is impossible. It’s like they stepped off the top of the mountain into thin air. There is no other track down. It’s too steep to climb down on the other side of the peak. We’ve lost them, somehow. Let’s go back down to the village and check each side of the track as we go, slowly and carefully.”

The hidden trio remained silent until the villagers were well past where they were hidden by Ellwin’s screen. “That’s it,” Jimmy said. I think we are safe now. Let’s dry off our boots while we wait for Ellwin.”

“Ellwin won’t be back for a while,” said yet another voice in Jimmy’s head.

“Who are you?” Jimmy asked.

“We’ve met before Jimmy. I’m Ira.”

“So pleased to hear from you again, Ira,” Jimmy said.

“Ellwin explained your predicament, Jimmy. But unfortunately, I don’t have the power to get you down the mountain safely. However, we both know someone who can help.”

“Do we?” Jimmy queried.

“Of course you do, Jimmy. It’s your good friend the Weather Man and he’s on his way here at this very moment. He can get you safely down the mountain back to your ship in the harbour.”

“How can we thank you enough for all your help, Ira.”

“Don’t worry about that, Jimmy. As a close friend of Matilda’s you are almost a member of the witches circle and we help each other out all the time. I’m sure you’ll be safe now so I’ll leave you in the hands of the WeatherMan. He’s almost here.”*

Jimmy bid the witch Ira goodbye and turned to his friends to explain what had transpired.

Moments later a round white cloud floated out of the sky towards the mountain peak.

“What’s that cloud doing,” asked Max.

“It’s the Weatherman’s cloud,” Jimmy explained. Follow me up to the top of the mountain and when the cloud touches the mountain just follow me.”

The friends watched with bated breath as the cloud edged nearer to them. The cloud stopped moving just as soon as it touched the mountain. Jimmy held Gemma’s hand and pulled her with him as he placed a foot on the top of the cloud and immediately descended a ladder into the belly of the cloud. Max was agog but had faith and followed in Jimmy’s footsteps and stepped off the mountain onto the cloud. The hole in the cloud top was just in front of him and he followed his friends down the ladder.

Standing at the bottom of the ladder Max gazed around him in wonderment. “Where are we?” he asked.

“I’ve no idea, Max, but we’re actually inside a cloud. How can that be?”

“Don’t be worried,” Jimmy said. “Let me introduce my friend the Weather Man.”

The Weather Man appeared from behind a control panel. “How good it is to see you again, Jimmy, and your friends, of course. All I know is what I received in a message from Witch Ira. She said that you needed my help to rescue you and two friends from the top of this mountain in the land of Ozmidium. It took me a little while to get here because I had to drop off my young apprentice pixie.”

“So, you do have a helper now,” Jimmy said.

“Yes, Jimmy. I took your advice and I’m training the little fellow, Clem is his name so that he can look after the weather when... I mean if... or when I fall asleep.”

“But where is he?”

“As I said, I had to drop him off, a little way up the coast, before I could come to your rescue. There is a limit to the weight I can carry around in my cloud. I knew that if I was to rescue you and two friends, thank goodness they are so small, I would need an empty cloud.

“Well, now that we are all aboard, where do you want to go? I am sorry I cannot get you all back to Lithania, nor Roombelow. With all this weight on board, the cloud will slowly sink lower and lower. I suppose we might travel 4 or 5 kilometres forwards before we are grounded.”

“That is absolutely wonderful, Mr Weather Man. Our converted sailing ship, the Celsius, is moored in the harbour very close to the bottom of the mountain. You don’t have to carry us very far, as long as we are hidden from that angry crowd who are searching for us.”

“Let’s get going, then. And stop worrying. They can’t see you inside my cloud.”

The Weatherman walked over to the control deck and spun the main wheel until the cloud was moving, ever so gently, down the side of the mountain. Jimmy pointed out the way to the harbour. The two Diamites looked on in amazement. They had heard Jimmy’s story about adventures with the Weatherman but this was real. They were travelling inside a cloud. Living in the cave world of Lithania they never saw clouds. They never experienced getting wet in the rain. The children in Lithania never had the chance to fly a kite in the wind. Snow and ice were unknown to them as was the warmth of the sun. After both being burnt by overexposure to the sun, neither of the Diamites were worried about the lack of sunshine in Lithania.

“Look,” shouted Gemma. “There’s the villagers from Crighton, searching for us as they hurry back down the mountain track. They’ll be able to see us if they look up.”

“Don’t worry about that, Gemma. You’re safe in my cloud. No one can see into my cloud from outside. Of course, we can see out.”

“This is truly magical,” spluttered Max. “It’s like dreaming in a different world.”

“You are not dreaming, Max,” said the Weatherman. “This only one of the many worlds I regularly visit. Unfortunately, I don’t visit Lithania because you don’t have a sky for my cloud to travel through.

“We’re getting closer to the harbour, Jimmy. Where is the Celsius moored?”

“She’s tied up next to the Traders ship, the Raven. But you can’t see it because it is screened by Ellwin’s magic mist of water. If you can hold the cloud steady just three meters to the right of Raven we should be able to drop straight into Celsius, straight off the cloud.”

“No problem,” assured the Weatherman as he made final adjustments to his many dials. “If this is about the right position I can let you out through a trapdoor in the bottom of the cloud.”

“That would be magical,” Geldus said. “Thank you so much for your help.”

“Jimmy, I’ll open the trapdoor and you can check our position,” Weatherman said.

Peering through the hole in the bottom of the cloud, Jimmy directed the Weatherman to hover in just the right place, directly over the Celsius. “We’re there Weatherman. It’s hardly any distance to drop, at all. Time for us to say our goodbyes, with many, many thanks for saving us.”

“That’s enough of that. I’m just pleased that we managed to get you safely off the mountain. Now, off you go. We’ll meet again, very soon I’m sure, and I’ll introduce you to Clem.”

The friends dropped through the trapdoor, no more than a meter, into the belly of their boat. As soon as all three were safe aboard Weatherman’s cloud rose into the sky, travelling northward to pick up Clem.

“What now?” queried Gemma.

“We set sail for Lithuania,” Max said.

“Not yet,” Jimmy objected. “We have to let Aaron and Midras know what has happened.”

“That’s too dangerous, Jimmy. We might get captured by the Traders,” Max said.

“They did not know that Jaz and Carl were stealing diamonites and they had nothing to do with kidnapping Gemma.”

“That may be true, Jimmy,” Max said. “but it is often the case that when there is one bad apple in the barrel all the apples turn rotten.”

Gemma piped up to support Jimmy “I think Jimmy is right. Aaron and Miras knew nothing about what Jaz and Carl were up to.”

“OK, Gemma. But how can we meet up with Aaron or Midras without risking being captured by the Crighton villagers? They will still be searching for us.”

“It’s easy enough to pull our boat right up to the side of the Trader’s craft. Then it’s an easy climb for me to reach their deck and to come out close to the cabin at the stern. We can see that they are still loading supplies for their next trip. I will wait until they’re near the cabin to attract one or other of them. Then I’ll make my move and try to acquaint them with the truth.

”In the meanwhile, get some nourishment inside you. There’s plenty of food in our supplies and there’s something to drink.”

In all the excitement of the escape and the chase and travelling in a cloud, no one had even thought about refreshments. Neither of them needed to be reminded for a second time and they dug into the supplies for food and water. Hardly a word was spoken while the friends sated their appetites. Then Jimmy showed his concern for Gemma. “Are you feeling any better now, Gemma?”

“I’m still burning on my hands, arms and face but it’s nowhere near as bad as it was before you rescued me. I need some cream to soothe the pain but I think I’ll have to wait until we get back to Lithania.”

“I’m sorry we don’t have anything with us to help but I’ll ask Aaron or Midras if they can help. Talking of which it looks like there’s only Midras on board at the moment. The other crew members are on the quayside sorting out the remaining cargo. I’m going now. Stay safe and don’t worry.”

In a trice, Jimmy had climbed the side of the Raven and was quietly calling Midras by name as he stood just inside the open cabin door. Midras looked up in surprise. “Where have you come from, Jimmy?”

“Come a little bit closer and I’ll tell you.” Midras edged closer to the cabin. “Don’t let the others know I’m here. I just want to let you and Aaron know what has happened.”

“Alright, Jimmy. You wait in the cabin and I’ll go get Aaron. He’s Captain of this crew.”

Jimmy crept further into the darkness of the cabin and crossed his fingers in the hope that Midras would not raise the alarm with the villagers of Crighton. Only a few nerve-racking moments later Jimmy heard footsteps coming up the gangplank onto the ship’s deck. He had heard them talking and knew that he had heard only two voices. He was however still relieved when only Midras and Aaron walked into the cabin and closed the door behind them.

They were amazed as Jimmy related the story of their recent dangerous adventures on the mountainside. It was difficult to comprehend the magic that was a handsbreadth away from Jimmy’s reach. He could talk to witches and their magic had helped to protect this strange boy.

Aaron told Jimmy, "The two thieves will be reported to the Law of the Land. They cannot be allowed to deceive the people we do business with. That business benefits all the inhabitants of Ozmidium. We buy supplies from the farms and factories around us and exchange it for cash or precious items when we trade with other tribes. It would make enemies of our customers."

"It would help to make amends with the Diamites if you could return the stolen diamonites."

"I'll make the thieves tell us where they have hidden them. I will interrogate Karl and Jaz before they're thrown into prison. I promise we will return any stolen diamonites that we can recover when we next return to Lithania. When is the next visit scheduled, Midras?"

"I can't tell you precisely. I'll have to check what was on the list we agreed to supply with their head of Council first. But it has never been much longer than four weeks between trips. It won't take us more than a day or two to find crew members to replace Jaz and Karl."

"That's good enough for me," Jimmy said. "I'll let Zephyr know that you will punish the thieves and return the diamonites they stole when we get back to Lithania. And now we really must set sail as soon as we can. Gemma in particular needs treatment for the burns "

"Do we have anything that might help," Aaron asked Midras.

"Not that I know about. Our crew is all hardened to the weather, wind, rain and sun. We don't need any creams."

Aaron suggested, "I can go and ask my good woman if she has any balms to help Gemma. I'll only be a few minutes. Where will I find you, Jimmy?"

“I’ll watch out for your return. Our boat is hidden from view. Until Jaz and Karl are in custody we will still be in danger from them and their villager friends.”

“You are not in danger any longer, Jimmy. The sheriff and his men are already looking for them. They’ll be captured as soon as they get down the mountain. I’ll go now and be back very quickly.”

Aaron departed and Jimmy left Midras, disappearing over the guard rail of the Raven. He reported to his friends waiting in the much smaller Celsius. “Aaron says we are safe now but I think we should wait until the sheriff has the thieves in custody. As soon as Aaron returns with or without any cream balm we set off for Lithania. There’s still a long journey in front of us. Keep your eyes open for Aaron.”

Just as he promised Aaron returned within a few minutes. He almost fell into the harbour in surprise when Jimmy just appeared by his side, as if by magic. His wife had provided a small jar filled with white cream. “She says this will take away the pain and provide further protection against the sun’s rays for both of you, my friends.”

Jimmy wasted no more time. The cream worked like a dream and Gemma’s pain was greatly reduced and Max also applied a generous layer over his exposed skin. Jimmy was in a hurry to get away from Ogton and Crighton and the angry villagers. They pushed their small boat away from the larger Raven and rowed towards the harbour entrance. As soon as they cleared the harbour Max raised the sail and made a course due south, according to the compass Jimmy had borrowed from Mr McDonald. Jimmy replaced the buckle into the sapphire blue belt, twisted it into place and the screen of water vapour disappeared.

There was still a long journey ahead but Gemma was safe and the wind was blowing them home at a brisk pace.

Chapter 28

Through the Storm

The wind was blowing steadily and Celsius was making good progress toward Lithania. Max was on the rudder, Gemma was huddled under the mast while Jimmy sat in the bow regularly checking the direction of travel with the compass. Initially, the wind was kind, blowing steadily north but when the wind veered Jimmy would point out to Max what corrections to make to their course.

Eventually, the breeze swung round to starboard, coming more from the West. Max was having to tack backwards and forwards to keep their boat headed in the right direction.

For the first time, Gemma complained. "The waves are getting higher. The wind is blowing stronger. I'm starting to feel a little queasy."

As the sun began to set in the western sky the light began to fade. Jimmy managed to light an oil lamp which he hung from the mast. The lamp began swinging from side to side and the waves were shedding white tops as the wind strengthened.

"We'll have to drop the sail, Max before we keel over," Jimmy advised. "This boat was not built to sail in these conditions. I'll help secure the sail and every one cinch a rope around your waist and tie it to the mast. We don't want anyone falling overboard."

No one took issue with Jimmy's instructions. The Western Ocean was now so stormy that it threatened all their lives. Celsius was tossed around like a straw in the wind. Max and Gemma were both badly affected by the rolling, boiling sea. Even Jimmy began to feel a bit green. The Celsius had not been built to sail the high seas. There were no waves on the waterways of Lithania. Water sloshed around their feet and they had only two drinking cups to bail out the rising level of seawater that spilt over into the shallow hull of their boat. Jimmy cupped his hands and scooped out as much water as he could but the sea was winning. The waves were even higher and started to crash down onto their small craft.

Suddenly a giant wave towered above them blotting out the angry sky. It crashed down on top of them with enormous force. Gemma hung on to the mast. Max hung on to the tiller. In the bows of the boat, Jimmy had nothing to hold onto except the rope around his waist. The wave washed Jimmy overboard. He was powerless. Cast into the cold roiling waters Jimmy could hardly catch his breath between being dunked under again and again. Then came tragedy. The rope around Jimmy's waist slipped the knot and he was cast adrift into the wild sea. Max and Gemma were horrified but dared not release their grip on safety to rescue Jimmy. He kept disappearing beneath the waves and was lost from view.

Jimmy struggled to get back to the surface after yet another breaking wave drove him under. He could see the surface but he wasn't getting any closer to it. His kicks grew more feeble. His lungs were burning. He had never held his breath for such a long time. He knew if he tried to breathe his lungs would fill with seawater and he would drown. He was dizzy with the effort of holding his breath.

"Twist the belt buckle, Jimmy," shouted the voice in his head. "Jimmy, you can do it. Twist the buckle."

Jimmy responded to Ellwin's call through the ether. His hands found the buckle on the blue belt and twisted it. The sea above his head calmed immediately and Jimmy's head broke free from the graveyard of the sea into fresh air. He gulped in enormous lungfuls of air and soon recovered his strength. Through the mist that surrounded him, he could see the Celsius still bouncing up and down on the waves. He swam toward the boat and the curtain of calm moved with him. Just in front of his eyes hung the rope that had been tied around his waist. Jimmy grabbed the rope and hand over fist he pulled himself towards the boat. As soon as he climbed over the gunnel the curtain followed him and immediately calmed the sea around Celsius.

"Jimmy," squealed Gemma, "You're safe."

"I think we are all safe now. Now that Ellwin knows about our plight. She's the one who is controlling the sea around us."

"All I can say is thank goodness for your good witch friends, Jimmy," gasped a very relieved Max. "I thought Celsius was going to capsize. We would not have been able to keep afloat for much longer. Ellwin has saved us all. Well, we're not safe yet. We are bobbing along in the middle of the Western Ocean not going anywhere. The light has almost disappeared from the sky and we still have a night time's sailing ahead of us before we reach the Rainbow Lake and home. What happens now, Jimmy?"

"I don't think we have any option but to wait for the storm to pass. We dare not put up the sail in the teeth of a gale and furthermore, I have lost Mr McDonald's compass."

"I think you are forgetting something, Jimmy," said the disembodied voice of Ellwin.

“Ellwin!,” Jimmy exclaimed. “Whatever can you do to get us out of this dangerous situation?”

“Have a little faith, Jimmy. I have many more powers than you could ever imagine. But, for now, I suggest you raise the sail. I will control how much wind blows through the screen. Furthermore, I will only allow wind into the sail that will push you in the right direction. Once the sail is up you and friends can relax. I’ll take control until you reach the opening to the Rainbow Lake.”

“Ellwin, thank you, thank you. I cannot believe how fortunate we are to have friends like you and Matilda. We are forever in your debt.”

“There is no debt, Jimmy,” Ellwin said. “We help each other whenever we can and I know you would not hesitate to help us if we needed it. Just like the time you gathered magic mushrooms to save Matilda when she was in danger. Anyway. We are wasting time. Get that sail up and you can be on your way.”

With that exchange over and the sail set, the friends were brought up to date with the conversation between Jimmy and Ellwin.

Celsius sped over the water, her sails filled with the wind. Ellwin controlled the direction of travel by allowing only wind through the screen which blew them due south. The sky was darkened by the storm and the blackness increased as night fell but the friends were at last able to relax. They were tired out by the effort of hanging on to Celsius for so long. Sleep had already hit Jimmy like a poleaxe and he was curled up across the bow seat fast asleep, his head resting on a damp, rolled-up cloak that had screened Gemma from the sun. The sea was no longer tossing their boat around and Max and Gemma were able to join Jimmy in slumberland in very short order. In the meanwhile, Ellwin kept

Celsius on course, heading for the opening in the cliff which gave entry to the Rainbow Lake.

No one experienced any dreams. The day's exertions had totally exhausted the trio. The fact was, they were now safe in Ellwin's care and her magic screen kept the waters around their boat calm while a steady wind blew them homeward towards Lithania. Hours later there was no reaction as the morning sky grew brighter. Ellwin's screen was no longer required to protect from stormy seas but it still helped to control the wind's direction. The coastline of Lithania was visible as a dark smudged line on the horizon and was getting closer by the minute. Gemma was first to lift her head into the morning sunshine. Sunshine, she thought, not more burning, please. And then she remembered the cream that Aaron's wife had given her. The tub of white cream was stored securely in her pocket. Her shiny face was soon covered in white cream and glowed in the light of day. She was closest to Max she shook him awake first. "You need to rub the cream onto your face, hands and arms before you get burned again." Max did as instructed, slowly losing the grogginess of a long sleep. While Max was waking Gemma moved to the bow and gently shook Jimmy's shoulders.

Jimmy slowly came back into the world of the living and stretched his limbs to relieve the stiffness that had taken root in his bones. "Morning, Gemma, and you Max. How are you feeling?"

"We're both much better now that the sea has calmed down," replied Gemma. "I am no longer feeling sick and I can see the cave opening that leads to Lithania. Ellwin is keeping us on course for home."

“She is a rather wonderful witch,” Max added. “We would never have survived in Ozmidium, nor on this ocean, without her help. I have never met a witch before but If all witches are as kind and as helpful as Ellwin there’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“You are right, Max. All the witches I have met are kind-hearted wanting only to be helpful but I do know, from the stories that Matilda has told me, that not all witches are the same. You have to be very careful when you meet a new witch for the first time because there is no way of knowing what sort of witch they are until you get to know them.”

“I don’t think I’m ever going to meet another witch, not in Lithania,” Geldus said. “If it hadn’t have been for you we would never have met Ellwin.”

“And I don’t think we could ever have got out of danger without the help of a very, very good witch.” Gemma ended the conversation just as Ellwin told Jimmy that the winds would now take them right up to the entrance to the Rainbow lake without any further assistance from her. She was leaving them to get back to her life as one of three witches that patrolled the heavens, the seas and the earth. “Keep my sapphire belt until you return to Roombelow, Jimmy,” she said. “I will collect it from Matilda on my next visit. Say my goodbyes to your friends for me. ‘Bye.” And with that, she was gone and the screen of mist disappeared.

“I guess we’re on our own, now,” Max said. Neither he nor Gemma had heard Ellwin say goodbye. He guessed the truth when the screen of misty spray disappeared, although Jimmy was still smiling, unconcerned.

“Yes. She’s gone, but if we are ever in danger on the water she would know. Ellwin won’t let anything harm us, of that I am certain.”

“What happens to the wind when we sail into the Rainbow Lake?”

Gemma asked.

“There was enough of a breeze to blow us out of the Rainbow cavern into the sea, so, we’ll just have to tack back and forth to get to the end of the lake.” Jimmy always seemed to have an answer.

“Makes sense,” Max agreed.

Celsius sailed on, in pretty much, a straight line, headed for the cave’s opening. Fortunately, the drinking water container was intact. The seawater had not contaminated the freshwater and the friends were able to slake their thirst, if not their hunger. There would be at least one further day’s sailing before they reached the end of their journey on the lake, and then a short hop, step and a jump to get back to the centre of Lithania and the homes of Max and Gemma’s sister, Zeea. Jimmy intended to extend his stay at the home of Zepher, Head of Council until the celebrations for Gemma’s rescue were over.

Before there could be any celebrations they had to finish the last leg of the journey home.

Jimmy gave Max a rest and took over on the tiller aiming their little craft for the dark opening in the cliff wall that marked the entrance to the Rainbow Cavern. The wind was steady and the tiller did not need any corrections to get Celsius safely through the cliff into the enormous cavern. For a short distance into the Rainbow Lake, the wind continued to fill their single sail, blowing them in the right direction. Then without warning the breeze veered about and threatened to blow them back to whence they came. Neither Jimmy nor Max were experienced sailors but they did know that they had to tack back and forward, seeming at times to be going in completely the wrong direction until they tacked

again in the opposite direction. The result was they ended up sailing in a zigzag line but overall in the right direction, except, forward progress was very slow.

Max said, "It's going to take forever to get home at this rate. It'll be more than one day's journey and I don't think I can last that long without some food inside of me."

Jimmy laughed at his friend's discomfort. "Max you are not going to die in a day or two because you've been without food. As long as we have fresh water to drink we can probably last more than a week. I don't think we can do anything any differently. So stop complaining and try to stop thinking about food."

The response from Max was a dissatisfied, "Hrrmph."

Gemma intervened. "I think we've got more things to worry about other than food. Look behind. We are being followed by sharks. There are three dorsal fins keep breaking the surface."

"Oh no! It doesn't matter that we have no food, we are going to end up as breakfast for sharks," quailed Max.

Jimmy stood up as tall as he could in the stern of Celsius to watch the sharks. After a moment or two, he let out a shout. "They're not sharks, Max. They're porpoises. They don't eat people. We're safe from any attack so stop worrying." And then, after a moment's thinking, he turned to Gemma. "Gemma, can you talk to porpoises? I know you can talk to fish."

Gemma had learned how to talk to fish and frogs when she was marooned at the bottom of the well in Roombelow. Then, there was no one else to talk to except fish and frogs and she was down there for an age and half until Jimmy rescued her.

“Strictly speaking,” she replied, “a porpoise is not a fish. It breathes air just like other mammals. I’ve never tried talking to porpoise, but here goes, my first attempt.”

Gemma moved to the rear of the boat, next to Jimmy at the tiller, and lowered her head until her mouth was only a few centimetres above the surface of the lake. Then she trilled a warbling sound which sounded more like a song than human speech. After several unsuccessful attempts, she turned to Max and asked him to drop the sail. “I think we are moving too quickly for my words to reach them, Max.”

Celsius slowed to a silent glide and Gemma tried again. She warbled onto the surface of the lake again and again. The porpoises were now swimming around Celsius with occasional leaps and splashes. She lifted her head. “It’s working, Jimmy. They say they don’t often come into the Rainbow Lake but they’ve been following for some time because of the magic screen that calmed the stormy sea. Now that I can talk to them what do you have in mind?”

“I’m wondering if the porpoises would be prepared to pull Celsius to the end of the lake. If so it will a lot quicker than all this tacking back and forth and not getting anywhere any time soon.”

“All right, Jimmy. I can only ask. Let’s see what they have to say.”

With that, Gemma again started her warbling conversation with the singing porpoises, who continued to swim around them. After a few more moments Gemma lifted her head to relay the answer to the friends. “Yes. They have agreed to give us a tow. They don’t often swim that far into the cavern. They prefer the salty ocean waters but they are prepared to help us out. They live in a

pod of one hundred porpoises but they only get together when there are shoals of sardines coming through their territory. ”

“That’s wonderful. Is there sufficient rope left on board that we can fashion a pulling harness?”

“What do you mean? A pulling harness?” Max asked.

“I think we need three long lengths of rope tied to the bow with a loop in the free end. The porpoises will be able to slot the loop over their beak-like mouths and then they can pull us through the water.”

Max recovered the lengths of rope that had once tied them to the mast, and, with the rope that hoisted the sail, they were able to fashion three pulling harnesses. Meanwhile, Gemma was talking to the three porpoises and they were singing their songs back to her. Whatever they were discussing must have been fascinating because Jimmy had to shake Gemma to get her attention to tell her the harnesses were ready in the bow to throw into the sea.

Gemma warbled her last conversation and the porpoises swam from the stern to the bow. Each porpoise slotted its beak through the looped ropes. Tails beat furiously and the water boiled. Slowly the Celsius swung around in the correct direction and began to move forward. Inertia was overcome. Gradually the speed increased and once the ship was moving the effort to move it became less. The porpoises pulled together and the Celsius skipped over the surface of the Rainbow Lake as if it were a flat stone skimming over the lake. The friends were heading for home at an unbelievable speed.

Less than an hour passed before the friends were hauling in the ropes the porpoises had dropped. Gemma said goodbye with thanks from all three of them to the porpoises. They had told her how to contact them in the future. All

she had to do was to warble a greeting into the lake and, they assured her, the sound would travel for miles in the water and they would hear her call wherever they were. With a splash on the lake's surface, the porpoises set off on their return journey.

Celsius shuddered to a stop, grinding in the pebbles on the shoreline. The three friends hauled Celsius halfway out of the lake onto the rocky shore so that it would not drift away. A work crew would be able to recover the Council Leader's flagship boat.

Max and Gemma were heading home to report to Zepher at the Council headquarters. There would be a warm reception from the Council and an ecstatic welcome home from their families. The trio was safe, unharmed but very, very hungry, just for a short while longer.

Chapter 29

Find the link to Roombelow

The excitement of the celebrations had subsided and life for the Zander family had almost returned to normal. Gemma's niece Jade was able to leave hold of her hand confident that Aunt Gemma was not a figment of her imagination. Her father was her very best hero. Max was feted for his part in Gemma's rescue and Jade's admiration for 'Uncle Jimmy' skyrocketed. Zach and Rachel were equally impressed although they were a little more subdued. After all, they were the grown-ups.

Would life in Lithania ever be the same again? Zepher and other council members were not convinced that Aaron would return the stolen diamonites. Were the Traders ever to be trusted again? The Lithanians had been trading in good faith for years and years but could they still trust them? They could do nothing but wait for the next scheduled trade meeting some four weeks away. Until then all they could do was concentrate on living as good a life as they could. Work crews were dispatched to recover the Celsius from the Rainbow Lake. It would need the mast to be removed and some repairs before it could be used as the Council barge again.

Jimmy said he could only stay in Lithania for another day and then he had to return to his Roombelow family. They would be worried out of their minds for Jimmy's safety, even though they knew how remarkable the boy from the starworld of Attalia was. They knew that he would face any danger to help or protect his friends. If no one else would step in Jimmy did not hesitate. He had become a natural leader. His newest fans, who had appointed Jimmy their

honorary uncle, were entranced by the story that he and Gemma repeated for at least the third time.

It had been agreed with Zepher and his wife Rubia that Jimmy would return to Lithania in just under four weeks, to be sure of being there when the Traders returned. There had been a very brief Council meeting during which Opella had extended an invitation for Jimmy to join the Council permanently. Jimmy had thanked everyone for the honour but he declined their offer. He explained, "Roombelow had become my home, living with the Mayor, Mr McDonald, and his wife Amanda. Of course, it is not going to be the same without my best friend Gemma living at the bottom of the well."

"I'm sorry that Roombelow is so far away, Gemma said, "and so difficult to get to. You can make the journey in less than half a day whereas it takes me almost two days to make the same journey. And that depends on how quickly I can get down the cliff that separates Lithania from Roombelow."

"I've been thinking about that, Gemma. There must be another connection between the two worlds. Originally, you crashed over a waterfall here in Lithania and eventually, that river carried you to the well in Roombelow. I know you can't remember where you crashed down but if I can do the journey in reverse we may be able to discover which waterfall leads to Roombelow."

"That would be wonderful, Jimmy."

"I'll just have to work out how we discover which waterfall leads us here. There

are so many streams that interconnect below the land of Roombelow. Once I have returned home I'll try to work out a strategy. In the meanwhile, let us enjoy the last few hours I have in Lithania."

The next morning, after another evening of celebrations with the Zapheer and Xander families, Jimmy bid goodbye to his adopted new families. Gemma accompanied Jimmy right up to the edge of the cliff marked the end of Lithania and the beginning of Roombelow. He knelt on one knee and Gemma kissed him on the cheek before hugging him warmly. There was no need for words between friends. Their friendship was cemented even more strongly than ever before. Jimmy reached the bottom of the cliff having abseiled down the rope that now hung down the cliff face. He turned to wave goodbye and set off at a brisk pace. Wearing his red Attalian boots his feet covered the ground at an enormous rate and the scenery flew by in a blur.

Jimmy was welcomed home by his foster parents and Matilda. They all wanted to know the story about the rescue of Gemma. Had Ellwins magic helped, they asked. What did the sapphire blue belt do to help? Was Mr McDonald's compass helpful? That was a little awkward. "I'm so sorry Mr McDonald. I lost the compass when I was swept overboard in the storm. It must have fallen from my pocket. Lost in the deep."

Mr McDonald assured Jimmy that he was unconcerned about the loss of a compass. "As long as you and Gemma are safe, that's all that matters."

With laughs and hugs all around, Jimmy's Roombelow family welcomed their hero home. Jimmy told Matilda that Ellwin had asked him to leave the sapphire belt with her and she would collect it on her next visit. "I told Gemma I would search for a route back to Lithania using the underground streams that run through the bottom of our well. All I have to do is find the route back."

"What is so important about that, Jimmy?" Amanda asked.

"If I can trace that route and Gemma can use her canoe, it should be quicker and easier for her to come back to visit with all of us."

"That would be wonderful," Amanda said. "Gemma has been part of the Roombelow family for so long, we all miss her. Now, when we drop the bucket down the well, there's no one down there to make sure it's full before we wind it back up."

"Sometimes," Mr McDonald said, "it doesn't matter how much you jiggle the rope up and down the bucket comes back up not even half full. It takes twice as much time to collect the amount of water you might need."

"On the plus size," laughed Amanda, "it does mean that you get a little more exercise, Mr McDonald."

They all laughed. Mr McDonald did present a rather rotund figure. It was strange that no one gave a thought to the fact that even Amanda, the Mayor's wife, always called him Mr McDonald. Only Amanda knew that his first name was Malcolm, but she rarely called him by that name.

"Excuse me," Mr McDonald said, a little hurt by the jibe. "I am not on the plus size. I am just your friendly, cuddly Mayor."

"And I wouldn't have you any other way," Amanda playfully responded, giving the Mayor a warm hug at the same time.

Jimmy explained to Mr McDonald that there was a problem. When Jimmy and Gemma had the adventure to rescue the giant eel, they had travelled in Mr McDonald's rowing boat which had been lowered down the well. Unfortunately, on the return journey, carried on the floodwaters, the boat crashed at the bottom of the well and broke into a thousand pieces.

"If that is all that is holding you up, Jimmy, you can forget about that. I had a new boat built within a week of your return. As soon as you're ready to search we'll lower my new boat down the well."

"That's wonderful. Thank you, so much."

"If there's anything I can do to help, I'm at your service."

"I need to rest up for a day or two to recover my energy. After that, I'll think about when to start searching."

Matilda joined the conversation. "I think you may have forgotten something Jimmy. Ellwin is coming to see me in a few days to collect her sapphire belt. But, more to the point, what element does Ellwin have control of?"

"Of course," Jimmy responded. "Ellwin has dominion over water sprites and a close affinity with all the waters of seas, lakes, rivers and the streams that flow from Lithania's waterfalls. If anyone can find a route between Lithania and Roombelow it will be Ellwin. Will you ask her to help?" Jimmy asked Matilda.

"Not a problem. I'll let you know after her visit. "

Just a little later Jimmy could hardly keep his eyes open. He was almost asleep in his chair. Amanda gently shook him. "It's bedtime, Jimmy. Go and get some rest. We'll catch up some more in the morning."

“Goodnight everyone. All the excitement and running about and almost being drowned has tired me out. I’ll come up the hill to see you tomorrow, Matilda.”

And with that Jimmy climbed the stairs to his bed while his friends finished off their cups of what tasted like cocoa, but was in reality, a brew made up of tree bark chippings. Amanda would not share her secret method of preparing the warm, sweet drink.

Work began the next day to lower Mr McDonald’s rowing boat to the bottom of the well. The villagers had to remove the roof and the heavy roller to make room for the boat to be lowered down the well. Jimmy was at the bottom guiding the boat into the stream. Once it was afloat Jimmy tied it up next to Gemma’s cave. Then the well was reassembled by Jimmy’s friends, although it must be remembered that everyone in Roombelow was a friend to all. That was one of the many reasons that Jimmy always came back to Roombelow from wherever he travelled. He even returned to Roombelow after his visit to his ‘home’ planet of Attalia.

Everything was in place to begin the search for an underground route from Roombelow to Lithania via the streams and rivers that threaded through this strange world. Matilda persuaded Jimmy to wait until Ellwin had been consulted. It would only be a day or so before Ellwin had finished her current witch business meeting, after which she would visit Matilda.

“Be patient, Jimmy,” Matilda had advised. “Ellwin will be here soon and then we can ask for her advice. There’s no one better qualified to find a route to the bottom of the waterfall in Lithania where Gemma came from.” So, Jimmy

waited, like the proverbial cat on a hot tin roof. He just could not settle himself to relax.

Only a day later, Matilda informed Jimmy that Ellwin was on her way and would arrive within the hour. Jimmy dropped everything he was doing and walked up the hill with Matilda to her home, perched at the top of the hill. The view from Matilda's house was panoramic: the town of Roombelow on one side of the valley, the path to the mountains where the one-eyed trolls lived was to the right-hand side, the opposite direction led over the dales towards the cliff face that gave access to Lithania, the back of the house faced a dark forest where no one ventured, except, of course, Matilda and her witch friends. They would never divulge what lay in a clearing near the centre of the forest.

Jimmy and Matilda had just sat at the table with a hot brew in front of each when Ellwin arrived. Ellwin, clothed in a shimmering blue-grey, ankle-length gown, joined them at the table and took a long draught from her cup. "Ah!" she said. "You make the best hot brew of nettle tea that I have ever tasted. What do you flavour it with, Matilda?"

"That, Ellwin would be telling. We each have our little secrets. But, more to the point, can you help Jimmy on his quest to find a route from the bottom of our well, in the centre of the market square to the bottom of a waterfall in Lithania? We believe Gemma was carried over a waterfall when she was exploring the waterways of Lithania."

"When she crashed," Jimmy added, "Gemma believes must have banged her head on the rocks and the shock wiped her memory clean away. She could not remember how she ended up in Roombelow. Now that she has found

her family in Lithania we are hoping we can find a river route between there and here so that she can visit whenever she wants to.”

Ellwin responded. “I am certain that if a route exists I will find it. It may take a few attempts but we will succeed. Give me the rest of the day and I’ll try to get back to you before nightfall.”

“Thank you, Ellwin,” Matilda said. “I knew you would help if at possible.”

“If it concerns water, then I usually succeed. Let me finish this gorgeous brew and then I’ll be off.”

“I didn’t know we were drinking nettle juice, Matilda,” Jimmy commented.

“It’s a very good health drink. It’ll keep you free from coughs and colds if you drink it regularly. You’ve been drinking it ever since we became friends, whenever you visited.”

“Well, I agree with Ellwin. It is a delicious drink.”

“That’s mine finished,” Ellwin said. “I’ll be on my way now. It’s difficult to know which place to start from. Lithania has so many waterfalls and we know many rivers are running below Roombelow. I’ll just have to try and try again. It’ll be a sort of a hit and miss type of search until I get a hit.”

“That sounds as if it’s going to take days and days, Ellwin,” Jimmy said, rather despondently.

“Come now. Jimmy. Have a bit of faith. I’ll probably be back a little later this afternoon. Never underestimate the power of a witch.”

“I agree, Ellwin,” piped up Matilda. “It’s a rare occasion when we cannot do what we need to do. And if I fail then there are many sister witches in our family who I can call upon for assistance. Together we rarely fail to achieve an objective. So, rest assured Jimmy, Ellwin will be back in a trice.”

Ellwin set off and Jimmy and Matilda had another hot nettle brew.

After finishing the brew Jimmy could not settle himself to relax so he took a walk back down the hill to his home with Mr McDonald. Jimmy missed the companionship of Gemma. While Gemma lived in Roombelow she and Jimmy had become almost inseparable friends who whiled away many an hour together. It did not matter that Gemma only stood as high as Jimmy's shoulder, her lack of stature was more than made up for by her great big heart. She and Jimmy were very alike in that respect, They would each do all in their power to help those less fortunate than themselves. Jimmy missed seeing Gemma every day but he was happy that she had found a real family. At the very least he could travel to see her and his adopted nieces and nephews. Perhaps she might be able to easily visit Roombelow in her canoe if Ellwin could find the route to the bottom of the waterfall she had crashed over those many years ago.

Jimmy could just not sit still. He could not concentrate to read. His constant fidgeting had started to get on Mr McDonald's nerves. Mr McDonald was sat at this desk trying to write a speech for his next town hall meeting. He put down his quill, blotted the ink and said, "Jimmy, you would be better off waiting for Ellwin with Matilda. Then you will know the result of Ellwin's search the moment she returns."

"That might be a good idea," added Amanda. She was thinking about her husband's need to finish off writing his speech but did not want to make Jimmy feel unwanted.

"I'll be back before nightfall, Jimmy said as he set off to Matilda's house on the hill. The villagers had almost finished rebuilding the well and he waved to his friends when he walked past.

Jimmy had only been in Matilda's cottage for a few minutes when Ellwin reappeared from the crystal ball. Initially, she was a wisp of grey and blue and white smoke trails that rose into the air above the table. Then Ellwin materialised standing by Matilda with a smile on her lips. "You've done it," Matilda said. "I can tell by that smug look on your face. You'd found a route."

"Of course we succeeded," Ellwin said. "There is only one waterfall in Lithania that links in to the stream that flows to the well here in Roombelow."

"Thank you. Thank you," gushed Jimmy. "Gemma will be able to come and visit us whenever she wants to."

"Don't jump to conclusions just yet Jimmy. I only found one route but it is not straight forward."

"What do you mean?" Matilda asked. "What have you found?"

"Let us all take a seat and I'll tell you."

Once everyone was seated with yet another goblet of Matilda's brew, she began her explanation. "The first problem is that the waterfall Gemma was swept over has two sections. The first fall is a three meters drop onto a rocky shelf one or two meters deep. After that, there is a much greater drop, probably ten or twelve meters into a deep pool. The water appears to boil over the edges of the pool running away in a series of rapids until the flow slows a little and it separates into three fast-flowing rivers. One of those rivers plunges over a drop of great height that I couldn't fathom. The middle river meanders away in a direction that is of no use to you. The third river continues flowing towards Roombelow but there are many false turns when the river divides and flows into nothingness."

“How can a river flow into nothingness? Jimmy asked.

“I don’t know the answer, Jimmy. I can only report what I saw on my search. I believe that the river sometimes takes a wrong turn and when it can’t continue on its way it simply gouges a channel downwards until it can flow freely again. I don’t think you should try to follow that branch of the river. I can plot the route that will take you to Lithania. How you will get there in a boat may be a bit problematic.”

“That is wonderful, Ellwin. Thank you so much. If I have a route I’ll work out a way to travel it in Mr McDonald’s boat.”

“Give me a moment or two and I’ll draw out the directions.”

After a few more moments Ellwin had completed drawing the map onto a sheet of parchment, borrowed from Matilda. “Here’s the map, Jimmy. I hope it helps.”

Jimmy scanned the map and noted where Ellwin had identified the hazards. But, of course, the primary hazard was the waterfall which fell from Lithania. “There is another problem, Ellwin. How can I mark out the route so that it can be followed in the darkness of the underworld?”

Matilda offered her thoughts. “Are there not diamonites shining from the walls in Lithania, Jimmy.”

“Of course! You are a wonder, Matilda. I was given some to bring home for Amanda. We’ll just have to work out how to attach them to the walls of the underground tunnels.”

Ellwin had done all she could to help, except for one more thing. “If you are going to be exploring waterways it might be better if you keep the sapphire belt.

It may be of help if you run into trouble.” They said their farewells and Ellwin departed in a tendril of smoke that seemed to be sucked into the crystal ball.

Jimmy and Matilda put their heads together trying to think of a way to attach diamonites to rock walls of the tunnels. They could not find an answer. Matilda contacted her witch friends but no one had a spell to make diamonites stick to stone or rock. There were no references to diamonites in her book of spells. It was beginning to get dark when Jimmy gave up, said good night, and headed hurriedly down the hill to home.

During supper, Jimmy brought Mr McDonald and Amanda up to date with what happened so far, in the search for a route to Lithania. “So your problem is how to attach diamonites to the walls of the tunnels?” Amanda said.

“Yes,” responded Jimmy. “It will be of no use using chalk signs on the damp walls of the underground tunnels. The chalk will disappear in no time. There would be the same problem with any paints.”

Amanda was smiling, widely. “Do you remember bringing me a handful of diamonites back from your last trip to Lithania?” A rhetorical question. “It is obvious you have never played around with them. Have you?”

“No Amanda. I gave them straight to you when I arrived home.”

“Well then, I think your problem is solved,” she went on. “One of the wonderful things about those beautiful crystals is that they are like little magnets when you place them close to rock or stone. They stick almost as tightly clams. You don’t need anything to stick them to the tunnel walls. They do it all by themselves.”

“But I can’t take them off you to trace a path to Lithania.”

“Of course you can, Jimmy. It’s more important to mark the route for Gemma to follow to and from Lithania to Roombelow than it is to make them into a piece of jewellery. You gave me a handful of diamonites, perhaps ten all told.”

“That is so kind of you, Amanda. I am certain that will be more than enough. Looking at Ellwins map there are five points where the streams split and go separate ways. I think if I attach a diamonite at the entrance to the correct route anyone following would see which route to follow. However, going in the reverse direction I would need another five markers mounted at the beginning of the downstream route. There are probably sufficient diamonites to do the job and I may be able to replace them when I explain what we have done to Zepher, the Council head.”

“Sounds like a problem shared is a problem solved, Jimmy,” said Mr McDonald. “I’m sure we will sleep better for knowing we no longer have a problem.”

Amanda smiled, knowingly. Mr McDonald never did like problems. He always said that life was too short to be concerned with problems. His philosophy seemed to be that if you ignored a problem it might go away and then you didn’t have to do anything. Jimmy was the opposite. He thrived on using his smarter-than-average brain to solve problems.

In the event, everyone was happy and when night time came around each of them slept soundly, without a care in the world.

Chapter 30

Mark the Route

Everything was prepared. Jimmy had packed climbing ropes. He added a cape to provide some protection from water spray. Food and drink were packed. 'Goodbyes' and 'best of lucks' and 'be careful's' were piled high by his many friends gathered around the well in Roombelow. After a final hug from Amanda, Jimmy was lowered into the darkness by Mr McDonald. He lit the oil lamp, hung it on the bow of Mr McDonlad's rowing boat and pushed off into the unknown. Amanda expected him to be gone for at least one complete day and night and possibly for two or three. She and Mr McDonald would not worry. They knew Jimmy could look after himself, come what may.

Jimmy rowed the boat for just a short distance before he met the first hurdle. At first, the tunnels were wide enough to allow Jimmy to row the boat steadily against the current using both oars. And he made steady progress through the darkness until he reached the next junction where the stream again split into two, flowing in different directions. Ellwin's map showed him that he must take the right-hand route. His problem was how to attach a diamonite to the tunnel wall from a moving boat. As soon as he stopped rowing the current of the stream carried him back down the stream on the left-hand tributary.

Jimmy would not be beaten by the first hurdle he encountered and he tried and tried, time after time, to attach a diamonite to the tunnel wall. But try as he might he could not hold the boat steady long enough so that he could attach a marker. There was no easy answer. The rowing boat had no anchor to hold it against the current and if Jimmy did not keep rowing the boat was swept backwards. He tried using one oar to lever against that tunnel wall but the oar did not find a firm grip on the river-smoothed surfaces. He tried to manoeuvre the boat crossways in the tunnel to jam it between the sides but that was not successful either. Jimmy's arms were starting to feel heavy from the effort.

Then, at last, he thought of asking Ellwin for help. He twisted the buckle in the sapphire belt and immediately had to begin rowing again to prevent being swept back to the start of his journey. In next to no time, Ellwin's voice filled his mind. "I can see you are having trouble, Jimmy," she said. "I can't stop the stream flowing. Too many fish living in it. You may have to return to the start of your journey to fashion an anchor that would hold the boat steady against the current. Or, you may have the answer on your finger."

"Matilda's ring?" Queried Jimmy.

"You can talk to the fish and ask them if they can help. I do hope they may be able to help you solve the problem. Good luck, Jimmy," she said before she disappeared.

Matilda's magic ring allowed the wearer to speak the language of any living thing. It was one of the many magic trinkets that Matilda misplaced among the cupboards and drawers in her house on the hill. Gemma had found it when the

pals were rummaging among Matilda's jumble of misplaced magic paraphernalia. It had proved to be very useful on many adventures that Jimmy had undertaken.

It was quite a struggle for Jimmy to row the boat and lean over the side to warble to the fish at the same time. He had to try several times before, at last, one fish responded to his calls. What was remarkable was that he had met this fish on a previous adventure, with Gemma. This fish was called Fiona and she had guided Jimmy and Gemma through the maze of tunnels when they searched for the giant eel. "Well, look who it is," Fiona warbled. "Are you off exploring again, Jimmy?"

"Why! Hello Fiona. I suppose I am exploring but at least this time I have a map to show me where to go. My problem is that I have to mark the route for when Gemma follows me."

"And how is little Gemma?"

"Fiona, I cannot carry on a conversation at the same time as I am rowing the boat against the current. I need to leave markers on the walls of the tunnels for Gemma to follow but I cannot place the markers and hold the boat steady at the same time. Can you help?"

"I can't do anything to help on my own. However, I am certain every fish that hears my call will want to help the person who saved all of us when the rivers and streams were in danger of drying up."

"Thank you, Fiona. I need to save my breath for rowing, otherwise, I'll get swept backwards."

"When you're ready, Jimmy, just give another call and all my fish friends will help to hold your boat steady until you have placed the marker."

A few minutes later Jimmy was ready to place the second diamonite marker. He warbled his message to Fiona and in a matter of moments, the stern of the boat was surrounded by hundreds of fish. They pushed against the stern, each beating their tails vigorously against the surface. The waters boiled and the boat held steady. Jimmy reached up and the diamonite in his hand attached itself firmly to the tunnel roof and shone like a beacon in the darkness.

Jimmy thanked Fiona and her friends and told her that there were still another five or six markers to place. "Just call for us when you need us and we'll be back," Gemma said.

The next three markers were placed without any problems arising. Jimmy's arms ached from the unaccustomed exercise. Rowing was not an activity he indulged in every day. His first trip to Lithania was the first time he had ever paddled a canoe but rowing used a completely different set of muscles. The nearer he travelled towards the waterfall the stronger the current flowed and the more difficult it became to row the boat against the flow of what had become a river rather than a stream. The map that Ellwin gave Jimmy showed that he would have to place one more marker before he reached the waterfall that Gemma had plunged over those many years ago. He reached the sixth tunnel he had to mark and trilled his garbled fish speak to Fiona once more. The fish did not appear to be troubled by the faster flowing river and gathered again around the stern to hold the boat steady.

When the marker was attached Jimmy reached for the oars again and thanked Fiona for her help. "That is quite all right, Jimmy. Call us If you need us again. Sounds travel a long distance underwater so whatever we are doing we'll

hear you.” And in multiple flashes and a myriad of colours from fishtails and fins, the fishy helpers disappeared.

Alone, Jimmy rowed on in the dim light radiating from the oil lamp. The flickering light bounced around off the damp walls of the subterranean tunnels. Jimmy had to dig deep to find the energy to keep the boat moving forward. There was no rest. If he stopped rowing the boat was swept backwards. It seemed to Jimmy that the closer he drew to the waterfall the stronger the current flowed and the deeper he had to call upon his reserves of strength and will power.

And then, suddenly, the waterfall was in front of him. Jimmy could not see anywhere to tie up the rowing boat. He was surrounded by foaming waters. The spray surrounded and almost blotted out his vision. The mist soaked him through his clothes to the skin. It was impossible to stop rowing to put on a cape. He had to stop rowing soon. His strength was almost drained. Then, without warning, his boat was picked up by the flow and was flung down the central tunnel of the three rivers that the waterfall fed. Jimmy was powerless against the powerful flow. He could not row against the current. The oars were useless and were in danger of being smashed against the rocks in what was a series of rapids. He shipped the oars. It was all he could do and he was in danger of being swept overboard.

Mr McDonald’s new boat was badly battered and it spun around unexpectedly on the current. With an enormous jolt, the boat came to a sudden stop. It was stuck between the two walls of the tunnel. It was quite a predicament for Jimmy. He was grateful for the rest but he wouldn’t be going anywhere, anytime soon. How he asked himself, how am I ever going to get to Lithania? His head dropped to his chest. He was voided of energy and his spirit was crestfallen.

It was unusual for Jimmy to be downhearted but for once he felt as though he was at the bottom of the barrel with nowhere left to go.

“What’s your problem, Jimmy?” Ellwin’s disembodied voice asked.

“Ellwin, I didn’t call you because I didn’t think there was an easy way to get out of this predicament.”

“Don’t underestimate the power of witches and water sprites, Jimmy. We are much more powerful than you give us credit for. Water in all its different forms, even as ice or steam or snow, is our domain. There’s not much we cannot do if it involves water. I can see that you have almost reached the endpoint on the map. The waterful is the last hurdle to get to Lithania from Roombelow and it is only a short distance in front of you. I can’t help with your boat but I can get you to the waterfall, no trouble at all. All you have to do is twist the belt buckle counterclockwise. I told you we would protect you if you were on or in or under water. The water will not touch you. It is shallow now so not even your feet will get wet. Just trust me, Jimmy.”

“Thanks for saving me again.”

“I told you before, Jimmy. No thanks required.”

“But I am so grateful, Ellwin. A last thank you.”

“That’s fine, Jimmy. Don’t forget to turn the buckle back when you are finished.”

With that, Ellwin was gone.

In the rowing boat, stuck in the tunnel. Jimmy sat for a while unable to comprehend what Ellwin had said. Jimmy had some superpowers but they did not compare to the range of the witches magical powers. All three witches he had met while in Roombelow exercised their powers for good. He could not

imagine meeting a similar witch using those same powers for evil. Matilda had told Jimmy that the evil witches were all around but Jimmy had no desire to meet one.

Jimmy planned out in mind what he must do next. He tied the end of one coil of rope to the bow of the boat and slung the remaining coil over his chest. Slightly apprehensive, Jimmy swung his legs over the side of the boat facing upstream towards the waterfall. He could hear the roar of the falling water but he couldn't see how far away it was because of the spray. Placing his trust in Ellwin he twisted the belt buckle anticlockwise and lowered his feet into the fast-flowing waters. He was not swept away by the force of the water. The shallow, raging waters seemed to part around his boots and they touched the bottom of the river bed without wetting his feet. Jimmy was able to walk on the smooth river bed. He tugged hard on the rope he had tied to the bow of the boat and on the second tug, it broke free. He was then able to pull it along behind him.

When Jimmy reached the waterfall the river divided over his head and he remained dry. There was a wide ledge at the base of the waterfall which spread wider than the width of the falling water. He dragged the rowing boat up onto the ledge, well clear of the falling water. Jimmy coiled the rope that was tied to the bow and picked up a coil of thinner, lighter rope. He slung the climbing rope over his chest and prepared to climb up to the ledge that the river tumbled over to create the enormous waterfall. In his mind, he prepared a route he would follow in his climb to the top. Jimmy had no equal when it came to climbing skills. Even when wearing his red Attalian boots, Jimmy's toes could find a firm grip in the tiniest crack or fissure in the rock. The climb to the top of this waterfall was more difficult than many of the climbs he had previously conquered. The constant flow

of water had smoothed the rock surface but Jimmy could still find a purchase for his feet to climb.

The biggest obstacle came at the very top of the waterfall where the lip of the rock shelf that the river fell over overhung the rest of the rock face. Tired as he was, Jimmy had no option but to hold on while his tired muscles seemed to scream their agony. Jimmy's reach was not long enough to grip over the edge of the lip of the overhang. Reaching upward and outward at the same time he was in danger of losing his grip. If he lost purchase he would plunge almost thirty meters onto solid rock. That was higher than two double-decker busses stood end on end. One slip would mean almost certain death.

Jimmy could not hold on for much longer. He had to do something while he had a little strength left in his limbs. As long as his feet were secure in the tiny a niche in the rock, he could move his hands gingerly over the rock face searching for a better hold. There was no better hold available at head height. There was a narrow ledge around five centimetres deep at around waist height, that ran off to his right-hand side. It was difficult to see how far the ledge continued because it was covered by the diverted falling water. He dropped his right hand to explore the extent of the ledge. Surprisingly, the ledge quickly broadened to ten or twelve centimetres and it had a lip which sloped back towards the wall. Jimmy formulated in his mind the acrobatic manoeuvre he must complete to swing over the lip to reach the top of the waterfall.

Placing his life in the hands of the river gods. Jimmy lowered both hands to the lip of the narrow ledge and kicked out his feet. He swung like a pendulum. Red Attalian boots kicked out to increase the swing of the pendulum until his feet were almost level with the top lip of the waterfall. One more superkick and Jimmy

let loose of his handhold. For a moment he seemed to hang in mid-air until the momentum of the pendulum carried the toes of his enormous feet, over the top lip. It appeared that he must plummet headfirst into the chasm but his toes hooked over and gripped the lip.

The pendulum continued to swing Jimmy back and forth. He was now face to face with the rock face, hanging upside down but at least the pressure on his hands and arms was released. All his weight was taken by his feet and legs. The first part of the manoeuvre was completed. The next part was just as daring. Jimmy released the toe grip of his left leg and allowed his body to half turn away from the rock wall. One hand and then the other stretched up over his knees reaching for his ankle. With an enormous lunge, Jimmy's hands gripped the lip of the waterfall and he allowed his foot to fall away. An easy swing then propelled him to the top shelf of the waterfall.

From the top of the fall, with water flowing around his feet, Jimmy breathed his relief and slowly recovered his strength in the dim light emanating just ahead, from Lithania's diamonite studded complex of tunnels and caverns. His priority was to find an anchor point for the rope which would allow Gemma to lower herself down, over the waterfall to the wide ledge at the bottom where the rowboat was beached. It was difficult in the gloom to find anything he could tie the rope to. There were no shrubs to be seen and he could find no rocks or boulders to tie a rope around.

He could do nothing more than to press on. He had to find a route from the waterfall to the point where Gemma had started her exploration in her canoe.

There was no Fiona to ask for assistance at this level. It would be impossible for her to swim up the waterfall, but there must be other fish. He trilled his fishy

call and it was answered by a myriad of multicoloured fish that swam to meet him, all wanting to help. When Jimmy explained his quest the phalanx of fish turned as one to lead the way.

The shoal appeared to be confident about which direction to take. Fortunately, there were only two branches in the river and he used his last two diamonites to mark the correct way. Then the shoal halted at a point which was indistinguishable from any other. "This is as far as we can take you, Jimmy," gurgled the lead fish. "Our domain ends here. I only know this is near the Council chamber because this is where we have seen the Council barge appear from its mooring."

"That is brilliant," gurgled Jimmy. "I know the way from here on. I've been here before. Many, many thanks for your kind help."

Jimmy pulled himself up onto the bankside beside the stream and orientated himself. He turned the buckle of the magic belt back to its middle position. Once on the bank side, he knew which direction to take through the diamonite lit tunnels. He still carried the coil of rope he had intended to leave hanging over the waterfall to help Gemma climb down. Instead, he lay the coil on the ground to mark the point he left the river. An uncoiled a length of the rope pointed toward the waterfall Gemma would need to negotiate on the way back to Roombelow. Jimmy did not think that there would be any passer-byes to disturb the location of the rope.

The Attalian boots helped speed up Jimmy's short journey, through what was a familiar route, to the home of Zeea and Max. Gemma was living with her sister until her future was decided. Daughter Jade was delighted to have her new aunt staying with them. As there was a spare room in Max Xander's home, Jade

hoped that Gemma would be staying permanently. It would be an awful choice if Gemma had to choose between living in Roombelow with all the friends there, including Jimmy, or living in the cave world of Lithania with her blood relations. Gemma had fallen in love with her nephew and nieces. She had direct blood links to her brother Geldus and sister Zeea. She was an integral part of two worlds. But Lithania was where her true family lived.

Within a few minutes, Gemma and Jimmy were debriefing to Zepher about the quest to find the route between Roombelow and Lithania. Zepher's wife, Rubia and Opella, his deputy, joined them. Together they decided that Jimmy should be given more diamonites to mark the return route to Roombelow. In addition, they would replace those that Amanda had given to Jimmy.

The group were gathered around one of the larger circular tables. The children were amusing themselves with some obscure game which involved throwing a handful of pebbles into the air to see who could catch the most on the back of their hands before throwing them up again to catch the remainder in the open palm.

Jimmy told Zepher and the group that he intended to lower a spare canoe and a paddle down to the bottom of the waterfall. He would make sure it was safely stored on the ledge at the bottom, well clear of the falling water. There was, he explained to his Lithanian friends, however, one problem. He had not been able to find a point to tie off a rope. Geldus spoke up. "Before I married Iris I was a member of a rock climbing club. We used strong metal spikes, called cleats, to hammer into the smallest crack or crevice in the rocks. Once driven into a rock the cleat grips very tightly. A single cleat will carry the weight of two climbers and still hold fast."

“That sounds ideal,” Jimmy said. “We’ll be able to lower a canoe down the waterfall ready for when Gemma wants to come and visit Roombelow. The route will be marked out with diamonites. Now that I can call upon the fish to help to stabilise the boat, I’ll be able to quickly place the markers on my way back to Roombelow. It should only take Gemma three or four hours to get from here to the bottom of the well. It’s all downstream. It may take a bit longer to get back to Lithania paddling against the current but I’m certain it will be a faster route than travelling overland.”

“Now that everything appears to be sorted,” Zepher asked, “how long are you staying with us this time, Jimmy?”

“I’m going back tomorrow. It’s been almost two weeks since I visited my Auth Ethel. She lives in the upper world.”

“It’s impossible to keep a track of all the worlds you have visited, Jimmy,” Rubia said. “It seems that you tell us a story of a different world every time you stay with us. Doesn’t he Zepher?”

“Yes, my dear. But I never tire of hearing Jimmy’s accounts of his travels. That’s why it’s such a pleasure to have you staying with us when you visit Lithania.”

“Thank you, Rubia. And Zepher. You make it like a home from home when I stay with you.”

“And when will you be back?” Zepher asked.

“I would like to be here when Aaron and Midras make their next visit with the next shipload of supplies.”

“I believe that is only seven or eight days away,” Zepher said.

“That gives me more than enough time, Zepher. I’m certain I will be here when they arrive.”

“Now that that’s all the business sorted,” Opella suggested, “Let us see if we can arrange for a celebration dinner with all your family, Gemma.”

“No sooner said than done,” Zepher added.

And in less than an hour, the food and drink were prepared and the party began.

Chapter 31

Two Worlds Joined

Gemma's immediate future was decided. She had a new home and a comfortable room in the Xander household with Jade, her adoring niece. Gemma's brother Geldus lived close by with his wife Iris and their family, twins Zac and Rachel. There were few happier families in Lithania. Jimmy Crikey was proud to be considered an adopted member of these families. The same applied to Zepher and Rubia who had designated a room specifically for when Jimmy came to stay for a few days in Lithania. There was no way Jimmy would ever give up on his friendship with Gemma.

Morning dawned as it always did in Lithania. The diamonite crystals increased the brightness of the ambient light slowly, over a few minutes. Morning ablutions completed and breakfasts eaten, children were seen off to school, and the families came together and gathered around a table in the Great Council Hall. Zepher and Rubia had made other arrangements for the day. It remained for the family to help Gemma to find a canoe. "Not a problem," said Geldus. "I know where to lay hands on one. There's a boathouse just a stone's throw away." Within ten minutes Geldus had brought back a new single-seater, lightweight, ply-wood canoe.

That done, all that remained was to lower the canoe to the bottom of the waterfall, without knocking a hole in the hull. The skin of the canoe was very thin

compared to the planks of wood used to build rowing boats. The problem was that the top of the waterfall could only be reached from the river flowing over the lip of a cliff but at that point, the river flowed through a tunnel which it filled from one side to the other.

Geldus and Max discussed how they might help. They thought it would be impossible to get any boat close to the waterfall without being swept over. How could anyone paddle a canoe against the force of the current while trying to lower Gemma's canoe down the waterfall? It was Geldus who suggested a possible solution. "It's obvious, isn't it? We can use cleats from my climbing kit. I can hammer a cleat into the tunnel wall just before the river covers the full width of the tunnel.

"Then, we can use ropes to hold our canoe against the current. We'll need to know how long a rope we will need to stretch between dry land and the top of the waterfall. I can fit another cleat there. A rope can be looped between those two cleats and we throw another rope over the fall. Jimmy can descend to the shelf at the bottom and then we can lower Gemma's canoe from a rope tied to the second cleat in the roof of the tunnel."

"There may be an easier way," Jimmy suggested. "There's no need for anyone to struggle paddling canoes against the current. I've not yet told you about Ellwin's magic belt."

"Max and I were there when you saved us using Ellwin's magic," Gemma said. "We know how it works."

"Yes. But since we rescued you, Elwin has explained a further use of her magic belt. When I twist the belt buckle to the left, water cannot touch me. It flows around me."

“All that magic in one small, blue crystal belt,” Geldus said. “It’s beyond imagination.”

“It is all very real,” Jimmy said. “Elwinn’s magic is fantastic whenever I’m anywhere near water.”

“So, Jimmy, how do you suggest we get the new canoe to the base of the waterfall?”

“First let me measure the distance from the first cleat on dry land to where we need the second cleat at the top of the waterfall. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

Jimmy left his friends and ran back to the bankside next to the river that led to the waterfall. He twisted the buckle and lowered himself into the river. Of course, Ellwinn’s magic made the river flow around Jimmy and he walked along the river bed without ever getting wet. He paced out the distance between the dry bankside and the top of the waterfall. Sixty metres he measured. Then he returned to the Council Hall and reported his findings to his friends.

“That’s not a problem, Jimmy,” said Zepher. “Geldus can collect the right length of rope from the Council Stores. Just tell the Gatekeeper you have my permission.”

“Shall we do it now?” queried Iris.

There was a chorus of, ‘Agreed’, and Iris added, “the sooner we have the rope the sooner we can get going.”

“On the way,” Geldus said, “I’ll pick up a few cleats from my climbing kit. It’s at the back of my wardrobe. Hardly been used since I got wed.”

“Is that you complaining?” quizzed Iris.

“ ‘Of cause not, Iris. I’m happier now than ever I have been.”

“You’re excused then,” she said with a loving smile on her face, leaning into Geldus for a quick hug. “Less of the canoodling, you two,” Max said, jesting with his brother-in-law. “Let’s get going.”

The whole clan made their way to the bankside that led to the waterfall. All eyes were on Jimmy. Those eyes grew wider and wider as Jimmy lowered himself from the bankside and stood on the river bedrock, dry as a bone. Jimmy turned back to them and with a flourish of his hands through the air, said, “Abracadabra! See!” The group saw and were amazed. “Has Max collected the rope?” he asked, trying to break the spell of silence that had overtaken them all. Once more he tried, raising his voice, “Max! Have you got the rope?”

Max recovered his composure with a start. “Yes. Here it is Jimmy.”

“First, hammer one of your cleats into the tunnel wall, right at the end. Then slot and knot one end of the rope securely through the eye. I’ll attach the second cleat at the top of the waterfall, and slot the rope through and tie it off. Now, anyone wanting to reach the top of the waterfall can use the horizontal stretch of rope.”

Jimmy attached the final loop of rope through the second cleat and allowed it to hang down the waterfall closest to dry ledge where Mr Donald’s rowboat was beached. As quick as a flash Jimmy climbed down the rock face of the waterfall. At the bottom, he pulled the hanging rope out of the cascading water. He then hammered the third cleat into a tiny crevice in the rock face. To this cleat, he tied off the end of the rope. Gemma would now be able to climb up and down the waterfall. The first rope looped from the top of the fall, upstream to the point where the bankside was accessible. She could now pull herself along the river to the point where she could easily climb up to the bank side.

“Gemma, are going to try climbing up and down the waterfall?” sister Zeea asked.

“Not today. Thank you.” Gemma responded. “I don’t feel like getting wet, at the moment.”

“Sorry about that,” Jimmy said. “Sorry that I can’t cast a magic spell to keep you dry.”

“You may not be able to cast spells, Jimmy,” came the disembodied voice of Ellwin, “but I can.”

“Ellwin!” Jimmy spluttered. “I didn’t know you were there.”

“I’m never far away when you are using the magic of the sapphire belt. I knew you must be in a spot of trouble, so, here I am.

“I gather you need a spell to keep Gemma dry as she climbs up and down the waterfall and along the river until she reaches the dry shelf. I’m just thinking about how best to do that.”

Jimmy interrupted the ongoing conversations on the riverside. He announced, “Ellwin is here, Gemma. She’s going to help.”

Gemma knew that Ellwin’s voice was to be heard only Jimmy’s head. Ellwin did not appear in a living form. She had to explain to her family why Jimmy appeared to be talking to thin air.

Ellwin returned. “I need you to hold Gemma close to you and the sapphire belt.”

Jimmy called for Gemma to come closer and embraced her in a bear hug.

“Can you hear me, Gemma?” Ellwin asked.

“Yes. You’re like thoughts inside my mind.”

“Good. Then I can begin. Don’t leave hold of Jimmy until I tell you. You must stay in touch with my belt. Close your eyes, both of you, and let the magic flow through you, just like the water in the river flows beneath your toes when you take a paddle.”

With closed eyes, Jimmy and Gemma were surrounded by a whirl of water that rose from the river. The family moved back in fear. They couldn’t hear Ellwin, nor could they understand what was happening before their eyes. Then it seemed that the whirlpool lifted the pair off their feet and they were twirled around like marionettes on strings. The whirling increased in speed until the friends were no longer visible to the watchers. What was visible were the flashes of lightning that penetrated the vision that their friends appeared to be locked in. It was horrifying to the Litanians because they had never experienced the weather systems that ruled the upper world. They lived in a constantly stable set of conditions maintained by the properties of diamonites which provided heat and light. It is true to say, the family cowered before such a mighty display of power.

Inside the whirlpool, with closed eyes, Jimmy and Gemma only experienced darkness and a strange warmth which spread from toes to fingertips. Just as suddenly as it began the whirling screen of water descended back into the river and they felt solid rock beneath their feet. “It’s done,” Ellwin said. “You can open your eyes now and leave loose of each other.”

“That was a strange experience Ellwin, but I don’t feel any different,” Gemma said. “Do you Jimmy?”

“No,” he said. “A trifle dizzy, but otherwise I’m fine. What magic have you performed Ellwin?”

“It will become obvious when Gemma steps into the river. Go on, Gemma. Try it out.”

Gemma’s family had no idea what was being said and they were horrified that Gemma was lowering herself into the river.

Gemma lowered herself very slowly towards the fast current of the river that flowed beneath her feet. Zeea called out, “Stop Gemma. The ropes haven’t been tested yet and you’ve not got a hold of anything.”

But Gemma had faith in Ellwin’s powers. She almost knew what would happen before it did. Ellwin would never allow her to do anything that would harm. The waters never touched Gemma as she lowered herself toward the river bed. The same magic from the sapphire belt that protected Jimmy was operating to protect her. “Give me a hand back up onto the bankside, Jimmy,” she said. Jimmy was just as surprised as Gemma.

“What have you done?” he asked Ellwin.

“I have given Gemma a bit of the same magic you enjoy when you’re wearing my sapphire belt.”

“But I haven’t got a belt,” observed Gemma, feeling around her tiny waist.

“Quite correct, Gemma,” came the ghostly voice of Ellwin. “What you now have is a sapphire pendant hanging around your neck.” Gemma was feeling its presence for the first time and she examined its beauty. “Thank you, Ellwin. It is beautiful but how do I call on its magic.”

“That’s quite simple, Gemma. Whenever you need my magic to protect you, you simply say, ‘Waters part around me’, and you will be protected just as Jimmy is. It can’t draw up a mist around you to hide you like it hides Jimmy but I don’t

think you're going to need that in the future. And, Jimmy, I have now gifted the magic belt to you, for as long as you need it."

"That is truly wonderful, and thank you," Jimmy said.

"It seems to me," Ellwin said, "that while you and Gemma are separated by two different worlds you will always still be the best of friends. You each need a way of visiting each other whenever you want, without putting your lives in danger.

"Now, that's enough chatter. I have to get back to my home among the water sprites. Be safe, my friends, but remember I am never far away if you need me."

And then she was gone. For several moments Jimmy and Gemma could only stare in wonderment at each other. Gradually the family realised that whatever magic had occurred it was over for now, and they gathered around amazed that the pair were unhurt by that strange experience.

It was a difficult set of circumstances that Zeea and Max, and Geldus and Iris, had to try and understand. An invisible witch with a voice that spoke to some, but not to others, which could only be heard by a selected few, was too hard to comprehend. They could not understand disembodied voices but they could see the results of the magic parting of the waters.

"It appears that all our efforts to install cleats and ropes have been wasted," Max said.

"I don't think so," offered Jimmy. "Those lines will provide a safety back up for any others who might like to visit Roombelow in the future."

"It's going to be difficult to persuade Jade to wait a while. She's already very keen to visit Roombelow," Gemma said.

Zeea jumped in, “Jade won’t be going anywhere until Gemma has fully tested the route. It seems to me that there are still some hard paddling challenges to test out before we know the route is safe for Jade.”

“That doesn’t mean never,” added Max. “Just, not at the moment.”

Jimmy laughed. “I’m pleased it’s not me to who has to tell her she can’t go to Roombelow yet.”

“There may be an upturned lip,” Zeea said, “but she’s a good girl, even if she can be a bit of a handful at times.”

“All part of growing up, isn’t it?” Iris said. “I’m just pleased my two are a bit older and more settled.”

“I guess it’s time we were getting back to the Council Cavern for some lunch,” Geldus said. “If Zepher is free we’ll update him about this little adventure.”

“That was no small adventure,” Gemma said, “It was life-changing. It looks like I’ll be able to visit Roombelow whenever I want to and of course, Jimmy can already visit us just as easily. What more could I ask?”

It was the day of the Trader’s visit. Jimmy and Gemma were waiting in the council hall with Zepher. The clatter of the sled’s wooden runners announced the arrival of the Traders. Warm greetings were exchanged between all. It was such a relief that the thieves had been weeded out by Jimmy’s efforts and good trust was re-established between them. True to his word Aaron returned the diamonites that had been stolen into the care of Zephyr.

“I’m just sorry that we cannot replace them in the tunnel walls Jaz and Karl chipped them from,” Aaron said. “We thought to bring the villains back,” Midras added, “to make them restore the diamonites into the walls.”

“But we thought better of that idea,” laughed Aaron. “Goodness knows what additional problems they could have caused. No,” he said. “It safer for us all that they remain under lock and key in the Ozmidium prison.”

“That’s now all behind us,” Zepher said. “Let’s just look forward to more good trading deals in the future. However, Zirco has a query.”

Zirco was the Council member with the most contact with the Traders. “My query is simply this:” Zirco said, “you have brought so many more goods than we ordered, Aaron. There are at least ten rolls of cloth that we didn’t order, and more wooden planks and spars and several more bags of grain. You must have made a mistake.”

“It’s not a mistake,” Midras explained. “We do not know how long our crew members had been stealing from you. We had a meeting of all Traders of Ozmidium and each of them agreed we should make some restitution to you. Each Trader donated one extra item and when it was all put together this what it added up to.”

“We value our reputation as fair Traders,” Aaron said, “and I hope we have restored some of the faith you had with us in the past.”

“It’s a done deal,” Zepher said. “Let that be an end to it, and let’s get these goods unloaded and stored away. Zirco has the agreed payment in cleaned and polished, high-quality diamonites ready for collection.”

Jimmy and Gemma were delighted with the way things had turned out. Honesty was certainly the best policy. Everybody won except the thieves. And the friends had joined together their two very different worlds. There remained the problem of one little Diamite who would not rest until she could visit the world of Roombelow with her most favourite Aunt Gemma.

How would Roombelow cope when they were visited by the indomitable Jade? That day was closer than anyone imagined.

Part 3 - Attalia

Chapter 32

Goodbyes

That Jimmy had enjoyed the past year in Roombelow was evident from the tears that tinged his sad farewells. Friends had gathered to bid him goodbye and to wish him a safe journey home. He took his leave of the portly Mr McDonald, the Mayor and his wife, Amanda. He warmly embraced Matilda the friendly witch. He shook hands solemnly with diminutive Gemma. The little lady had been an almost inseparable companion during Jimmy's stay in Roombelow. But Jimmy Crikey had decided to return to his own world, the planet Attalia.

Many years ago, when Jimmy was but a baby, he travelled to Earth with his parents. They were ambassadors from Attalia searching the galaxies for signs of intelligent life. They found planet earth and landed their starship in a clearing in a forest. They were in the process of hiding their ship when they were surprised by an elderly lady with white hair gathered in a bun on top of a round bespectacled face, who just happened to be out for a walk. The person they met introduced herself as Ethel. Just Ethel.

She immediately invited them to her home, a cottage on the edge of the forest for

tea and biscuits. Ethel was so calm and at ease, it was as if she met aliens in the forest every day. They explained that their mission was one of exploration and they did not wish to be discovered by the general population in case their very presence caused panic. Their task was to gather information without being detected.

Ethel promised to keep their secret and they became great friends in a very short space of time not least because Ethel was allowed to look after their unusual son while they carried out their work. During the following weeks, they were almost daily visitors to Ethel's small, warm cottage.

However, despite coming from a very advanced civilisation they were not prepared for Earth's coughs and colds. They knew nothing about Earth's common illnesses and a few weeks later they caught an infection, probably influenza. Because they had no resistance to the virus, they rapidly became very ill and a raging fever sapped their strength. Ethel found them staggering through the forest with their baby in their arms. She took them back to her cottage and tried to nurse them back to health but a few days later, they died, leaving their baby in her care. From then on she looked after Jimmy as if he were her own son, and all was well until he started school. Then the cruel jokes and jibes of the schoolchildren were aimed at the one different boy.

Jimmy wasn't just different, he was unique. There was no one else on Earth who looked like Jimmy. He had a bright red mop of hair, big blue eyes, a small snub nose, pointed ears and ... ee-nor-mous feet.

Because of his strange appearance, he was made to feel very unhappy and miserable, so much so that he eventually decided to run away.

Now running away is not normally a very sensible thing to do, but, just this once it seemed to work out well. His discovery of the underground world and the town of Roombelow led to many adventures and Jimmy's self-confidence grew day by day as

the townsfolk took to their hearts this very unusual boy.

Everyone was disappointed that Jimmy intended to leave and of course, Gemma wanted to join him on his journey to the stars. Jimmy had a difficult time persuading her to stay with her new family in Lithania because he couldn't be sure of how long he would be away, or even if he would ever return to Roombelow.

The farewells over, Jimmy began the climb back up the hole, through the tangled tree roots, that led to the forest floor. Then, as often he had in the past few months, he made his way through the forest, along the lane and walked up the path to Aunt Ethel's cottage.

As usual, a warm welcome and a hug awaited him. Aunt Ethel always seemed to know when visitors were on their way to see her but this was to be only a short visit. She threw a shawl around her shoulders to keep off the early morning chill and together, hand in hand, they walked back down the path, along the lane and into the forest. They followed the winding track past the circle of crooked oak trees and trekked deeper into the dark, wooded depths. As the track petered out they knew they were close to the concealed leafy dell. Jimmy moved aside the low hanging foliage to reveal the hidden clearing. The morning dew glistened on the long grass, and there in the centre, partially covered by branches, was the circular, shining hull of the starship.

It took them a few minutes to clear away the branches which camouflaged the hull. Aunt Ethel located and pressed the hidden switch and a short ramp silently swung down to the ground. They climbed aboard and made their way directly to the control room. Once there, Aunt Ethel pressed a few switches to activate the onboard computers which sprang to life with an enormous chattering and flashing of multicoloured lights.

"There you are, Jimmy," she said, standing back from the control panel. "All

systems are working. The computers are programmed and ready to go.”

There followed a brief moment of silence before Jimmy threw his arms around Aunt Ethel. He couldn’t hide the sorrow of parting and, despite his brave efforts, a few sobs escaped into Aunt Ethel’s enfolding form.

“Now then,” she said. “Let’s not have any tears. You’re going back to your homeworld. Be happy. We’ll always have our memories of each other, and no matter where you are my love goes with you.”

“Thanks, Aunt Ethel,” said Jimmy, stifling the tears. “Thank you for everything.”

“That’s enough of that,” interrupted Aunt Ethel. “You have a long journey ahead and you must set off quickly before the world wakes up. I’ve shown you how to get the ship started and the computer will give you all the help you need.”

With a quick, final kiss she retired from the starship and stood at the edge of the clearing to watch. Jimmy pressed the button to retract the ramp and prepared for lift-off.

Strapped securely into the commander’s flight seat Jimmy stretched out to reach the controls. His hand hovered momentarily over the red bar, and then, finally committed, his fingers reached out and depressed the bar. The engines rapidly whirled into life. The whining sound reached a screaming pitch and then subsided to an almost imperceptible purr. The ship rose so smoothly into the air that it was some seconds before Jimmy realised he had left the ground and Aunt Ethel far behind.

The acceleration continued and the pressure pushed Jimmy firmly back into his seat. Within a few seconds, he was travelling away from Earth at two thousand miles per hour. The flight speed indicator registered Mach 3.0.

Slowly the pressure eased and Jimmy was able to unbuckle the seat belt and walk over to the observation port. He looked out at the ever-receding planet called

Earth. Whether or not he would ever see it again was unknown and he drank in the beauty until the blue planet became a pinprick in the far distance.

They passed the outer planets of the Solar System and the starship sped faster and deeper into space.

Jimmy went back to the console to check the controls. The speed indicator ramped up and up, faster and faster until the units changed to show the starship's speed at 0.7 LV's. One LV equalled the speed of light. One hundred and eighty-six thousand miles per second. He glanced again through the port and the Solar System was lost among the myriad of stars that form the swirling Milky Way.

Despite the tantalising longing to enjoy the scenery, Jimmy knew it was time to make further course corrections and he tore himself away and resumed his tasks at the control console. He pressed a button requesting current flight status and the computer displayed the results. Speed just under one LV, pressure good, atmosphere breathable, followed by the words: "Computer awaiting course co-ordinates before approaching time warp".

The next few minutes were vital and Jimmy tried to recall Aunt Ethel's instructions. It was no use! Try as he might, he could not remember what to do next. Then he remembered the computer. It had automatically guided the ship so far, but there was another mode of operation. He found the switch marked "Interactive Mode" and pressed it fully home.

The computer immediately responded. "Awaiting verbal instructions before negotiating the Gamma time warp."

Jimmy was struck dumb. He didn't know what to say. The computer paused and then began again. "Awaiting verbal instructions before negotiating ..."

"You've said that once," interrupted Jimmy.

“Without instructions, I cannot function,” droned the computer.

“But I don’t know what instructions you need,” said Jimmy in exasperation.

“Any instructions you give will be evaluated before action is taken,” said the computer. “Refer to me as XRU and I will respond to your voice and adjust the flight programme as necessary.”

“XRU,” said Jimmy, “I don’t know what to say. I only know I want to go to Attalia.”

“That is all I need to know,” said XRU. “My memory banks contain all the information needed. I will take over control, set course for Attalia and negotiate the Gamma warp.”

“Yes please,” said Jimmy.

“I will refer to you again when further instructions are required.”

“Fine!” said Jimmy, much relieved that someone, or something, knew what to do.

With that exchange, XRU began to process Jimmy’s orders and took over control of starship XR. He, she or it, adjusted the speed to exactly one LV and carefully guided XR towards the Gamma warp at exactly the right angle of approach. Jimmy did know it then but the slightest error would precipitate disaster. They could end up millions of miles away in another time zone. It was not unknown for starships to get so hopelessly lost that they were never seen or heard of again.

But there was no need to worry with XRU in control. It happened so quietly and quickly that Jimmy was not even aware that they had safely negotiated the Gamma warp until they were speeding at several times the speed of light towards Attalia.

As XRU was now in command Jimmy felt it was safe enough to leave the control room to explore the starship further. He walked a full circle around the ship along a brightly lit, smooth-walled corridor past rows and rows of hatches and doors. Those that he tried to open would neither push, pull nor slide. Disappointed he gave up the

tour and returned to the control room. His mind turned to food. He was feeling quite peckish after all the excitement but there no sign of food or drink anywhere. He remembered the computer. "XRU, where will I find something to eat?" He asked.

XRU responded in his staccato machine voice. "Make your way to your quarters, cabin A1, and then tell me what you want."

"But all the doors are locked," Jimmy said.

"Negative!" said XRU. "They are not locked. You can open them with a voice command. Your vocal pattern is now registered on the central control computer and as the commander of XR you have unlimited access."

"That's unbelievable!"

Jimmy set off immediately to find cabin A1. When he reached the door he said, "Open!" and, controlled by the unseen hand of XRU, the door slid open with a swish of air. He stepped through the open doorway into the cabin and behind him came the sound of a second swish as the door slid closed behind him.

Inside, soft lighting radiated from the cream coloured floor and ceiling. The main cabin was circular, about ten metres across. Several low divans were arranged around the edge of the cabin and a solid, green-veined, marble table stood in the centre, surrounded by four upright chairs with padded seats and arms. Multicoloured ornamental mobiles hung by invisible threads from the ceiling and slowly rotated in a nonexistent breeze. Alcoves in the walls housed statuesque figures clothed in flowing robes.

Jimmy's first concern, however, was for food. "What did XRU tell me to do?" he thought aloud, and from nowhere, in particular, XRU replied. "If the Commander will tell me what he needs I will attend to his requirements."

"Well, er, really," hesitated Jimmy. "Just something to eat and drink."

The marble table pulsed with a blue light and even as Jimmy watched, there appeared in the centre, out of nowhere, a glass of clear liquid and a solitary green, marble-sized pea.

He reached first for the glass and lifted it to his mouth. The glass was cold to the touch and gingerly he took a sip. Surprise! Surprise! It was as if all the fruits of the world had been condensed into the clear liquid, which Jimmy soon drank off, completely satisfying his thirst.

His attention turned to the pea. "What is this, XRU?"

"It's a protein pill," XRU explained. "To save on space and weight the ship carries only concentrated food. There are sufficient vitamins and proteins in that one pill to last throughout a whole day. Oh! If you require a further drink just place the empty glass in the centre of the table and it will be refilled."

Jimmy turned his attention to the "pea" pill and popped it into his mouth. It was covered in a layer of a hard sugary substance which quickly disappeared as he rolled the pill around in his mouth. Under the sugary layer was the green stuff and this tasted just like pea soup, which Jimmy just loved. As further layers dissolved away in his mouth he could imagine eating first a slice of fish fillet and then a succulent pork chop with mashed potato covered in gravy and finally, a roly-poly jam pudding. In the space of a few short moments, he felt as though he had scoffed a four-course dinner.

Then the effects of the long day began to catch up on him and he could not stifle the yawn. Through an open arch, he saw the sleeping quarters and he went directly through intending to have a little nap. He took off his red Attalian boots, lay down and drew up the solitary silver sheet. His head touched the pillow and the room lights dimmed. The silver sheet warmed up and he closed his eyes. Before a count of two, he was sound asleep, comfortable, warm, secure, while XRU guided XR through the

darkness of deep space carrying Jimmy towards his home planet of Attalia.

Chapter 33

Toward the Stars

It was the gentle, insistent, repetition of XRU's voice that all too soon woke Jimmy from his deep slumber. Rubbing his eyes he threw back the silver sheet. It was a moment or two before he remembered where he was. XRU's voice droned again, "Would the Commander please report to the control room." Then it dawned on Jimmy - he must be the Commander of XR, no one else was on board.

"Coming XRU," he shouted as he pulled on his boots, and then ran quickly back to the control room.

"Enemy forces approaching from Delta space region. Estimated time of arrival 1200 hours."

Jimmy checked the flight deck clock. It stood at 10.30 a.m. Only one and a half hours before XR would be intercepted by some unknown enemy.

"How do you know they're the enemy?" asked Jimmy.

"Three marauding starcraft identified by radar. They appeared through the Delta time warp twelve minutes ago and immediately changed course to intercept us."

"Where are they from and what do they want?"

"They are from Ock in the Delta region," replied XRU.

"But why are they the enemy?"

"Because for hundreds of years they've been trying to take over Attalia. Ours is

the only inhabited planet in the Gamma region. All the rest are barren, deserts without atmospheres. Kursh, the ruler of Ock, has waged war on us for centuries, trying to expand his empire beyond the confines of the Delta region. Fortunately, Attalia has an excellent defence system, a shield that guards the planet, and, so far as I know, he has never penetrated to the surface of Attalia. XR has a very similar defensive shield.”

“Are we quite safe then?” asked Jimmy.

“We might be,” said XRU. “But Kursh is always trying out new weapons against us, and remember, XR has been away from Attalia for many years. XR may not have the most up to date weapon protection systems on board. There’s not much we can do until they get nearer. In the meanwhile, I’ll check out our systems and turn on the force field.”

“Don’t we have weapons of our own?” Jimmy asked.

“Yes! XR is fitted with laser beams but I am programmed to use them only as a last resort. Would the Commander please change into his battle tunic. There’s plenty of time before we engage Kursh. You’ll find a full wardrobe in your cabin.”

There was nothing Jimmy could do in the control room so he returned to his cabin. Eventually, after much searching, he found the wardrobe behind a sliding door in the bedroom, but all he could see was row upon row of different coloured squares of material, each with a round hole in the middle. He decided he would try on the red one and put his head through the hole so that the cloth hung down over his shoulders and touched the floor at his feet. This can’t be right he thought.

“XRU!” he said aloud.

“Yes Commander,” XRU responded.

“This is a very strange set of clothes. I can’t find anything that fits me and there isn’t a battle tunic to be seen.”

“The battle tunic is the square of silver cloth with a hole in the centre. May I suggest that you take a shower, put on the tunic and then return to the shower.”

“All right XRU. I’ll do as you say.”

Jimmy stripped off his clothes and went into the bathroom. Well, it wasn’t a bathroom as there was no bath in it. There was a shower rose in the ceiling. He need not have worried. The shower switched itself on and Jimmy was thoroughly refreshed by the scented spray of warm water that made the whole of his body tingle.

After exactly two minutes the shower stopped. Jimmy looked around for a towel. He was just about to step out when a stream of warm air surrounded him. The current of air came out of slots around the showerhead and within another two minutes, he was completely dry.

Jimmy had never taken a shower with clothes on before, but that was what XRU had told him to do. So, he put the silver square of cloth over his head and stepped back into the shower. This time the water came out of the rose in a circle of spray, all around his head without wetting his red mop of hair and streamed down over the silver square of material. Then a remarkable thing happened. The cloth began to shrink and slowly wrapped itself around his body, his arms and his legs. Soon he was completely dressed in the silver battle tunic. He stepped out of the shower cubicle and his tunic was dry.

He pulled on his red Attalian boots and looked every inch the Commander of starship XR.

Chapter 34

Skirmish with Ocks

Jimmy returned to the control room. He could see on the radar display that the three enemy starcraft were much nearer now and getting closer with every passing minute.

“Anything new to report, XRU?” asked Jimmy.

“Negative,” said XRU. “We’ll be within the range of their missiles inside the next ten to fifteen minutes.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to attack them before they fire at us?” asked Jimmy.

“Attalians never attack first – we only defend. The laser beam will be used only if the Ocks get through our defences.”

Jimmy thought he’d better be quiet for a while. That last outburst from XRU was as near to being as angry as a computer can be. He watched the three glowing dots on the radar screen for a while and then looked out of the observation port.

“I can see them now,” he shouted, and the three starcraft became visible specks of light moving closer through the background of star-studded space.

Just then the communications channel sprang into life and above it, the video display screen flickered on.

“This is Klun, flight lieutenant of Kursh, from Ock,” said a very strange, stilted voice. Then the picture of the bald speaker appeared on the video screen. A dark, almost black, pair of eyes peered from a cruel-looking face which was covered with lizard-like scales. A hooked nose twitched over a narrow mouth as he talked. “By order

of Kursh I command you to surrender,” continued Klun. “If you do not immediately respond I will attack and destroy you,” he threatened.

XRU spoke to Jimmy, “You, Commander, must give Klun his answer.”**

“At once,” said Jimmy, and he pressed the button that allowed him to broadcast his reply.

“Attalians do not surrender to Ocks,” said Commander Jimmy. “I warn you not to attack or we will respond and destroy you.”

If a computer can chuckle, then that’s what XRU did. If a computer can feel proud then that’s what XRU felt. If a computer can ever admire a boy, then XRU did and had complete faith in him.

The display screen went dead. There followed a few seconds of silence. Then Jimmy saw the three starcraft take up a formation around XR to attack from different directions.

It was the increasingly rapid ‘pips’ from the radar that alerted Jimmy to the fact that they were under fire from Ock missiles. The missiles exploded simultaneously, at three different points, filling the darkness outside with vivid flashes of light. But Jimmy didn’t feel even a tremor. The protective shield around XR had detonated the missiles half a kilometre away from XR’s hull. Jimmy was jubilant. “They’ve not broken through,” he shouted. But another wave of missiles was already on the way.

The same thing happened again. Several times the Ock missiles exploded as they hit XR’s force field. The flashes got bigger as the Ocks got closer, but they couldn’t break through the force shield.

Then the leading Ock starcraft took up a position immediately ahead of XR, clearly visible through the observation port.

“That’s a new tactic,” commented XRU. “I wonder what they’re up to now.”

Klun again appeared on the screen. "Your last chance to surrender," he said.

"Never," replied Jimmy, and the display screen went dead.

Almost immediately a shaft of blue light was emitted from Klun's craft.

"It's a laser," said XRU. "They didn't have laser weapons at the time XR left Attalia."

Well, the Ocks certainly had laser weapons now and from three different directions, they were trying to bore through XR's protective shield.

XRU gave his report. "The force shield will be broken through in two or three minutes Commander."

"Then now is the time to reply to their attack," said Jimmy. "How do I fire our laser?"

"Sit at the controls," directed XRU. "In front of you, you'll find a sliding cover over the laser sights, a red knob for aiming and a red firing bar on the right-hand side."

Jimmy slid open the cover and adjusted the knob until one of the Ock craft was directly in line with the cross wires in the centre of the sights. He pulled down on the firing bar and XR's crimson laser beam shot out towards the Ock ship. The bright orange fireball that followed was a sure sign that one Ock starship had been completely obliterated. He swung the sights around searching for his next target. Quickly he centred on it and fired. Another red flash from the laser and another Ock craft disappeared in an orange fireball.

The warning from XRU came too late. "Our force shield has been neutralised, Klun is through our defences."

Klun only had time to fire one more missile before he too was engulfed in the certain death of the orange fireball. Jimmy had responded quickly, but not quickly enough.

He was thrown to the floor by the force of the Ock missile blast and the sudden rush of escaping air was all around.

“Quickly,” commanded XRU. “You must get to the life support capsule. I’ll seal off the damaged area. That will hold back the fire for a short time.”

Jimmy got to his feet, “But I can’t leave you behind XRU.” he cried. He had come to regard XRU more as a friend than a computer.

“You need me with you,” said XRU. “All you have to do is take out my memory core and replace me in the life support craft. I’m in the black box just below the display screen. Pull out the box, then get back into the control seat and throw the blue switch.”

Jimmy heaved, pushed and shoved but he couldn’t pull XRU’s memory core out of the computer. Valuable seconds ticked away and then there was a loud explosion. Pieces of broken, twisted metal flew past his ear and he was blown off his feet again, as slivers of glass and steel hit him in his side.

He pulled himself up, surprisingly still in one piece. The battle tunic was unmarked. It had protected him from the blast and there wasn’t even a hole in it.

Fire now raged in the control room but still, he struggled to free XRU. At last, using a metal spar, he managed to prise XRU out of the starship’s computer.

The fire was licking at his feet as he ran to the Commander’s seat. He flicked open the switch covers and with XRU on his knee, located the blue switch. He threw the switch and the chair suddenly sank into the floor.

Down a dark tube, it hurtled and came to a halt with a jolt in the small life support capsule. The circular hatch above his head clanged tightly shut and with breathtaking acceleration, the tiny capsule ejected out of XR into space.

XR disintegrated behind him, and the blast flung the capsule further into the surrounding blackness of space.

Chapter 35

Rescued by Zaru

It took a while for Jimmy to recover from the shock and the acceleration. It felt as though his heart had been pushed from the front of his chest back to his spine. He was unhurt but quite breathless. The Commander's seat was now located in the nose section of a small, oval-shaped hull. In front of him was a small control panel, and in the centre was a small, rectangular hole. That, of course, must be for XRU, and sure enough, when Jimmy tried it for size, XRU slid home with a reassuring clunk.

It took a few minutes for XRU to transfer his memory to the new computer and Jimmy was quite relieved when eventually he chattered, "All life support systems functional, Commander. No damage to report."

"Well, that's a relief," said Jimmy. "What happens now?"

"Everything under control," said XRU, quite chirpily. "S.O.S. signal already sent and acknowledged by Attalia. Rescue ship on its way. Estimated time of arrival two hours from now at fourteen-thirty."

Jimmy checked the onboard clock - it was only 12:30, half-past twelve! It was hard to believe that the battle had lasted only for half an hour. It had seemed like a lifetime, and yet in another two hours, he would be rescued by his people, from Attalia.

The life support capsule continued its journey through space at a much-reduced speed. It wasn't fitted with the same powerful, space drive motors as XR. XRU

explained that Life Support Capsules were intended to save the crew in the event of destruction of starships. Each starship carried as many Life Support Capsules as were needed to carry the crew to safety. Packed on board each Life Support Capsule were concentrated provisions, enough to keep the crew fed and watered for up to seven days. The rescue ships from Attalia could reach almost anywhere in the universe within that time.

The rescue station on Attalia was always on the alert for an S.O.S., night and day. Once they located the Life Support Capsule, which they did very quickly, all radio messages from the capsule were blacked out and a radar shield was set up around the small craft so that the enemy would not be able to find it.

Just before four o'clock, Jimmy caught his first glimpse of the Attalian rescue ship. It didn't have the same shape as the circular XR. This one was more like a conventional rocket; large, long and slim with three smaller rocket motors attached on fins around the main hull. The closer it approached the greater became its size until the bright, white mass dwarfed the small Life Support Capsule. Large doors swung open in the belly of the rescue ship and Jimmy, XRU and the Life Support Capsule were sucked inside.

The Life Support Capsule docked automatically and locked into position. The doors beneath them swung silently shut. The Life Support Capsule entry hatch opened with a clang and Jimmy was almost blinded by the unexpected bright shaft of light from above that illuminated the cabin.

"Up you come," a voice said.

Jimmy obeyed, but not before he had unplugged XRU. He tucked the computer under his arm and climbed up the metal rungs of the ladder towards the brightness.

"Why it's only a boy!" exclaimed the voice, and strong arms gently helped him up

the last few steps.

Jimmy blinked until his eyes grew accustomed to the light. Three tall Attalians were standing around him all dressed in silver battle tunics just like his. The one with a crimson shield on his chest spoke. "Come with me young man, we'd better take you straight to Commander Zaru. Leave the computer here with Darl."

"XRU comes with me," said Jimmy.

"As you wish," said Maru, "But the computer's memory banks will fizzle out unless it is plugged into our power source."

Reluctantly Jimmy handed over XRU to Darl, and before Maru led the way out, he saw XRU being connected into the rescue ship's power circuits.

He had to take extra long strides to keep up with Maru as he marched through a long corridor towards the control centre. Jimmy noticed that Maru was wearing red boots, just like his, and his feet were not at all big. Jimmy had lived with enormous feet for so many years but he'd never really got used the idea. It didn't help when people laughed at them. It was only a few months ago that he'd found out that his feet wouldn't grow any bigger. Instead, the rest of him would grow up normally and would soon catch up with his feet.

They reached the control centre, not that much different from the one on XR. He was ushered in towards Commander Zaru, a tall, slim, redheaded Attalian with a crimson shield on his chest, just like Maru's except his shield had three silver stars on it. He also wore a crimson belt around his tunic.

"Is this the only survivor?" he asked Maru.

"No one else was onboard Commander, but the boy did save the onboard computer. It's being connected into our system now."

"Good!" said Zaru, and then took Jimmy and sat him down on a divan at the edge

of the control room. "Bring the boy a drink," he said to one of his officers and then turned his attention back to Jimmy. "Who was Commander of your ship?" he asked.

"I was," said Jimmy, proudly.

The surprised Commander smiled. "Children don't command starships. I know the crew must be dead but who controlled the ship?"

"I did," said Jimmy, adding hastily, "with a lot of help from XRU."

"Oh yes, the computer," said Zaru. "Well a computer may be very clever but it can't fly a starship on its own. Come now, here's your drink, take a sip and then let's have the whole story, from beginning to end."

I don't think Zaru was quite expecting the tale that followed. Jimmy recounted the exciting story of his adventures on earth and the whole crew was so astonished that they all gathered around and listened intently. When at last Jimmy finished his account there was complete silence.

Zaru broke the silence, "So you are the son of Commander McGellan. Now, at last, we know what happened to him. We had given up all hope of ever seeing him, his wife or child ever again. But here you are and truly you were the Commander of starship XR. Welcome back to Attalia Jimmy McGellan."

The crew broke into applause as Zaru saluted Jimmy and they added their congratulations.

When the rescue ship arrived at the base on Attalia there were hundreds of people waiting to greet them. Commander Zaru had reported back directly to the President and news of Jimmy's arrival had leaked out. "I am to escort you directly to the President's headquarters, on his orders," he said.

"But what about XRU?" asked Jimmy.

"It's only a computer, Jimmy," Zaru said, "but you seem to have taken quite a

liking to it. All right then, tell you what. We'll rig up a portable power pack and you can take XRU with you."

"Oh! Thank you," said the grateful Jimmy. "We've become very good friends."

"Friends with a computer, whatever next?" muttered Zaru, rolling his eyes and smiling. On Zaru's instructions, XRU was fitted into a portable power source that could be slung over Jimmy's shoulder. Zaru led Jimmy down the ramp to the waiting car. Well, it looked a little like a car, except that it had no wheels, and no roof - just a glass canopy that slid over the top.

Comfortably seated beside Zaru, Jimmy was fascinated as the 'car' rose about ten centimetres off the ground and silently glided forward. The waving cheering crowd parted slowly to allow them to pass until they reached a roadway that carried them up and over the surrounding city.

As the 'car' sped along Jimmy was spellbound. It was the cleanest city he had ever seen. Spotless, glass-faced, multi-story buildings; sparkling skyways carried on long slender support columns way above the heads of the pedestrians; scenic parks and green open spaces interspersed the streets. It was like a fairyland, a dream, and still not real.

He was still dazed when Zaru swung the car off the main skyway and down a slipway that disappeared into the roof of the largest building to be seen for miles around.

They stepped out of the car in the top story park and Zaru led the way to one of the many lifts that ran down the outside of the building. Everything seemed to move quietly on Attalia and the silent lift hissed before stopping at the ground floor. The doors opened and they were greeted by two lines of uniformed presidential guards.

"Follow," commanded their captain, and Jimmy and Zaru were escorted through

two enormous steel sliding doors, into the President's Hall.

The sheer beauty of multifaceted, glass crystals shed their rainbow patterns everywhere. Jimmy stopped in his tracks and gazed around, open-mouthed.

"Jimmy," whispered Zaru, "the President is waiting."

Together they marched down the crystal hall and, right at the end, flanked by more guards was the President himself.

He was a man at least two metres tall with a slim athletic frame. His shoulder-length hair was silver-grey and his face carried the beginnings of a few wrinkles around his steel-blue eyes. He wore a scarlet tunic and on the left side of his chest a silver shield glittered catching the light as his chest moved when he breathed. Around his shoulders hung a long silver cape which reached down to the tops of his red boots. Altogether a resplendent figure.

Zaru saluted the President by crossing his right hand over his chest to cover his crimson shield.

The President smiled and nodded his head in approval, and then turned his attention to Jimmy, who just stood there, quite spellbound.

Zaru whispered out of the corner of his mount, "Jimmy, it's courtesy to salute."

Jimmy came back to life and copied Zaru's salute. The President's smile widened. "Commander Zaru has told me just a little of your story and I just had to meet you as soon as you landed. Welcome home, you've been away a long time. But before we get to know each other better in less formal surroundings I have a pleasant duty to perform. It gives me great pleasure, as a reward for your extraordinary bravery in the face of attack by Kursh forces, to confer on you the rank of honorary Commander in Attalia's Space Fleet."

At the President's signal, a fanfare of horns announced the start of the brief

ceremony that followed.

One of the President's aides advanced carrying a crystal tray. On the tray was a scarlet shield with three silver stars on it. Taking the shield he walked towards Jimmy and kneeling, placed it on Jimmy's silver tunic, just over the left breast. The shield appeared to glow briefly for a second then it became firmly, immovably attached to Jimmy's tunic.

The President stood up, stepped back a pace and saluted. Jimmy did the same, and suddenly the formalities were over. The guards and aides were dismissed with a wave and, placing one arm around Jimmy's shoulders and another through Zaru's arm, the President led them out of the hall into the lift which carried them up to his living quarters.

"Now we can relax," he said. He threw his cape over the back of a chair and sprawled his tall frame in another.

"Come now," he said, "make yourself comfortable and take a seat." As they settled down refreshments arrived.

Sitting on the edge of his chair, XRU by his side, glass in hand, legs swinging, Jimmy felt very much at ease with a very informal President of Attalia. "My Commanders call me Alpha in private moments such as these," he said. "I would like you to do the same. Now Jimmy, so far I have only a very sketchy picture of what happened to you after you left Attalia with your father and mother. I would like to hear the whole story from you, and this time we'll record every detail, so just relax and begin when you are ready."

So, yet again, Jimmy relived the sadness, the joys, the fears and the dangers of the many adventures that had befallen him during his long stay on Earth.

Zaru had heard the account once, on the Rescue Ship, but he enjoyed again

every moment of the retelling.

“A magnificent tale,” said Alpha, when Jimmy had at last told the whole story, right up to the time of his rescue by Zaru. Alpha stood up and walked around the room, seemingly deep in thought. Several moments passed before he spoke again.

“It's very late now Jimmy and you must be very tired so I suggest you stay in my guest quarters tonight. Tomorrow we'll think about your future. One of my aides will show you to your room. In the meanwhile Zaru and I have much to discuss. Goodnight, Jimmy,” he said.

The aide arrived and Jimmy picked up XRU. After thanking them and bidding them goodnight he followed the aide to the guest rooms.

Left alone in the comfortable surroundings of the guest quarters Jimmy soon found the bed, a welcome sight at the end of a very memorable day. He looked down at his silver tunic wondering how on earth he could take it off. He walked over to XRU and switched the computer on.

“XRU! How do I get out of the battle tunic?”

“To do that Commander you must reverse the dressing procedure. Go to the shower and you will be bathed in water and warm air; the suit expands; you take it off and then you shower normally. After you've been dried you're sure to find a nightshirt in the wardrobe.”

After his shower, Jimmy picked up the silver battle tunic which was now no more than a square of silver cloth with a hole in the middle and a scarlet shield with three silver stars on one side of it. He hung it in the wardrobe and took out another square of material, coloured with rainbow stripes.

“Is this the nightshirt, XRU?” he asked.

“Affirmative,” responded XRU, “But don't try shrink fitting a nightshirt,

Commander, or you'll end up very wet."

"Thanks," said Jimmy with a smile and he drew up the warming, silver bed sheet to his chin. The lights dimmed. "Its been a marvellous day XRU."

"Today's events are all recorded in my memory banks," said XRU.

"But you've been switched off for half the day," said Jimmy.

"That only stops me from interacting; it doesn't prevent me from recording."

"Shouldn't I plug you in somewhere?" asked Jimmy.

"Not necessary", said XRU. "The portable power pack has enough energy to last for years and years. Computers do not sleep. I am always ready to process your instructions, Commander."

"You're a pal, XRU," said Jimmy just before he drifted into sleep. "You're a real pal."

Chapter 36

Command Headquarters

The next day, after washing and dressing, Jimmy looked out of the floor to ceiling window on to the morning's movements. The skyways were humming as thousands of cars carried their occupants to factories, to offices, to schools or perhaps even to the shopping malls. He later found out that these wheel-less cars were known as PT's, which was a short way of saying 'Personal Transporters'.

He could also see long strings of PT's joined together just like trains. When they stopped passengers disembarked and walked to the edge of the skyways, and judged when to step into the continuously moving lifts, which carried them down to the pedestrian areas. There they could complete a short journey on foot without having to watch out for traffic.

There were thousands of people going about their everyday business, in a very orderly way. No screeching of brakes, no honking of horns, no traffic noise, everything just seemed to flow, effortlessly.

XRU interrupted the wonderment of watching a new world city go about its everyday life. "Someone approaches," he said, and seconds later there came a gentle, polite knock at the door and one of the President's aides announced himself.

"President Alpha would like you to join him for a late breakfast. If you'll follow me I'll take you to his offices."

Jimmy sling XRU over his shoulder and followed. They went up one floor in the

lift, along a corridor flanked by dozens of open-plan offices, through the door at the end and face to face with Alpha, half-hidden behind an enormous half-moon desk.

“Good morning Jimmy,” he smiled. “Welcome to my office. As we’re a little late this morning I thought we’d take breakfast here. Zaru will be joining us shortly so while I attend to one or two urgent matters why not have a look around.”

Jimmy nodded and his eyes slowly roamed over what Alpha called his office. Office indeed! This was Command Headquarters. It was fitted out with the most comprehensive of communication and monitoring systems. Rows upon rows of small display screens around the room linked HQ to the many cities and defence stations scattered around Attalia. One section monitored deep space in the Gamma region another monitored all internal flights, yet another was guarded by a clear, plastic cover. This was the offensive weapons section, and only eight keys existed to open its locked door. One was held by the President, the others by Alpha’s seven senior Commanders, who were known as Commander Generals. Zaru was one of the seven, although Jimmy didn’t know that just yet. He hadn’t learned that a Commander with a scarlet belt has the honour of being a General, but he would soon learn to tell the differences between the various ranks by the small differences in their tunics.

President Alpha was still busy, so Jimmy transferred his attention to a remarkable object that stood in the centre of Command HQ. He walked all around it examining it closely before he realised what it was. It was a solid marble conference table, but a table shaped like a star with eight points. He thought it was strange that there were no chairs and he started to walk across the deep pile carpet towards the large windows. Just then there was a short, sharp knock at the door and in marched Zaru, straight to Alpha’s desk. He saluted smartly and Alpha lifted his head. “I’ll only be a moment or two more. Take a seat, Zaru and I’ll join you shortly.”

Zaru turned to Jimmy. "And how is our new Commander this fine morning?"

"I don't think I'll ever get used to the wonders of Attalia," replied Jimmy. "Everything is so different from Earth."

"Come and sit a while," said Zaru, walking over to the star-shaped conference table. Jimmy wondered if he was going to sit on the table and watched curiously. Zaru took hold of one of the points of the startable and pulled it out from the centre of the star to reveal a plush, leather upholstered chair with a vee-shaped, padded backrest. Jimmy went to a star point adjacent to Zaru and did the same. It took only the slightest touch to pull back the chair which slid out as though on a cushion of air. Jimmy could see now that when all the chairs were withdrawn the remainder would become an eight-sided table, but with all the chairs in place, there was not the slightest crack or line to be seen in the apparently solid marble star.

Alpha joined them at the table. "And now, what about some breakfast? What would you like this morning?"

Jimmy was quite relieved when Zaru answered first. "Fruit juice followed by three poached eggs and six rashers of bacon." At least they seemed to have real food on Attalia, Jimmy had thought he would be eating green pills for the rest of his life. He ordered a more modest breakfast, one egg and two rashers of bacon, with fruit juice.

"Make mine the same as Zaru's," said Alpha.

Jimmy looked around. "Who are you giving the order to?"

"A central computer," said Zaru. "Something rather similar to your XRU there. It will pass on our request to the food processor for this building and within a moment or two - ah! here it is now."

The table had pulsed briefly and there appeared before them three ready-cooked, piping hot breakfasts. Each was served on a glass tray with cutlery, and a glass of fruit

juice. Each meal was served to the correct place and, without more ado, they started eating.

“Um!” said Alpha, through a mouthful of egg, “Zaru and I talked about you long into the night Jimmy. Now that you’re back on Attalia its a shame that our efforts to find you a home have come to nothing. It would seem, Jimmy, that you are the last surviving member of the McGellan Family.”

“Oh!” said Jimmy, a little disappointed that there were no aunts, uncles, cousins or grandparents to welcome him back.

“But,” said Zaru, “you could walk into any family house on Attalia and be welcomed like the son of Attalia you are. Everyone on Attalia knows your story now, and many would dearly love to have you join their families.”

“However,” said Alpha, “I would like to be the first to offer you my home, such as it is.”

“But I think it’s a beautiful home,” said Jimmy “and I’m deeply honoured by your offer, but may I keep XRU with me?”

“Who?” asked Alpha. “Oh! Your computer. I hear from Zaru that you’ve become quite attached to it. Of course, you may keep it, Jimmy. XR was completely destroyed so its computer is surplus to requirements now.”

“XRU isn’t surplus,” said Jimmy. “He’s indispensable. He’s advised me on just about everything since we left Earth.”

“Well then give XRU to me for a moment,” said Zaru. He took XRU over to the control computer, plugged it in and commanded the master computer to update XRU’s memory banks. “If you’re going to have XRU around for advice he’d better be programmed with the best and most recent information we have. There! That didn’t take long. Now, let’s finish off breakfast,” he said as he passed XRU back to Jimmy.

“It’s decided then?” queried Alpha. “Welcome to your new home.”

Zaru turned to Alpha, wiping the egg off his chin. “Jimmy is also a Commander, Alpha, and a very good one. Shouldn’t he be allowed to join our full council meeting? He’s already seen Command HQ’s secret systems and I’ll warrant he’ll always have a new idea or two that may help us.”

“Providing the full council agrees,” said Alpha, “And I’m sure they will. After all, none of us has had first-hand battle experience against Ock’s latest laser weapons.”

Jimmy’s chest swelled with pride. “Tell you what!” Alpha continued. “There’s a council meeting this afternoon. Why don’t you show Jimmy around Rescue Base? Have some lunch and then meet back here at three o’clock. Fifteen hundred hours.”

Zaru finished off his drink, stood up and pushed back his chair so that it melded into the star. He saluted Alpha and said, “Off we go then, Jimmy. Until fifteen hundred, Alpha.”

Jimmy was still in a daze with XRU slung by his side, when the canopy slid over the PT and Zaru drove back to the main skyway. The journey back to Rescue Base was a short one and no words were needed. Just a smile passed between the two friends.

Chapter 37

Attalia' s Defence Systems

Together Jimmy, with XRU, and Zaru stepped out of the PT at Rescue Base. The place was deserted. There was no sign of activity. The launching pads were empty and there didn't appear to be any guards on duty.

"This way, Jimmy," said Zaru, leading the way to one of the many low buildings that sounded the launch pads. Jimmy was about to follow but the whirring noise behind him made him turn round just in time to see the PT disappearing down a hole in the floor. As it sank out of sight the hole closed up, with a soft clunk!

Hm! Automatic parking thought Jimmy. He had seen so many strange and new things in the past two days that he now half expected the unexpected.

He ran to catch Zaru and they reached the door together. The door slid open and admitted them to the mysteries of Rescue Base. The low buildings that Jimmy saw from the surface were just like the tip of an iceberg. There was a whole underground complex beneath them. The lift carried them several hundred metres down to where Zaru showed Jimmy the Rescue Ship launch pads. There were six in all, each with a triple engined rocket ship standing at the ready. Zaru explained how in the event of an emergency the roof section above each ship would slide open and the Rescue Ships were then lifted to the surface on hydraulic platforms ready for immediate launch.

The tour around the cavernous Rescue Base continued. They stopped in front of a glass tube, about two metres in diameter, which curved out of sight in both directions.

Zaru tapped out a code on a keyboard at the side of the tube and within seconds there was a hiss of air and a transparent plastic bubble arrived inside the tube and stopped beside them. Doors in the tube and bubble opened simultaneously and the pair stepped in and sat down. Doors closed with a swish and with a hiss the bubble was propelled along through the tube.

“We’re leaving Rescue Base now,” said Zaru as the tube tunnelled into darkness. “Next stop Defence Base.”

“Oh!” said Jimmy, “But I thought Command HQ controlled the defence system.”

“Yes, the defence is controlled by CHQ but the operational systems are hidden underground. They’re a bit too big for CHQ.”

They emerged from the tunnel into a brightly lit cavern. It took a moment for their eyes to readjust. Meanwhile, the bubble had stopped. They climbed out, the doors slid shut and the bubble disappeared in answer to some other call. Now that Jimmy could see again he stood, transfixed by the enormity of the underground cavern which stretched further than the eye could see. Everywhere there was enormous, humming, spinning machinery.

They stepped onto a moving walkway and were carried past a multitude of gleaming metal coils, transformers, insulators, reactors, accelerators, and miles and miles of interconnecting cables.

This was the power station for Attalia’s defence systems. Just as Jimmy’s starship XR had had a protective shield so did the whole planet of Attalia. The difference was one of scale, Zaru explained. “The force field around Attalia requires a terrific amount of electricity to hold it in place. There are two nuclear power stations continuously feeding it with power. Altogether there are five stations, two in use, two on shutdown for repairs and one in reserve.”

“But what is the force field made of?” asked Jimmy. “XRU switched one on around our starship and although there was nothing to be seen it certainly protected XR from the Ock missiles. They did eventually break it down, with some sort of blue laser beam.”

“Yes!” said Zaru, “But starships don’t carry enough power to make force fields as strong as the one which protects Attalia. As to what a force field is Well perhaps your computer can answer that one in nice simple terms that you’ll understand.”

“XRU!” commanded Jimmy, “Please explain the force field.”

XRU seemed to bubble with enthusiasm. It seemed such a long time since he had been in use.

“Glad to help Commander,” replied XRU. “Forcefield is a broad region of high-density energy in the form of an ionisation screen.”

Zaru interrupted, smiling as he watched Jimmy’s puzzled expression.

“XRU! Keep it simple.”

“Sorry, Commander General,” replied the computer. “My memory did not take into account the Commander’s long absence from Attalia. I will begin again. Nuclear power stations manufacture large amounts of electricity.”

“Got you so far,” said Jimmy.

“And this electricity is made to do two things. Firstly it produces energetic particles, called ions, in accelerators. The ions are invisible but think of them as specks of dust. Each speck carries enough power to light up a small light bulb, and millions and millions of them are guided up into the sky by a strong magnetic field. There they stay quite harmless until something tries to pass through them. If an enemy starship collides with the field it releases the enormous energy inside the invisible specks, and the intruder is destroyed.”

“I think I understand,” said Jimmy. “Thank you XRU.”

There was a pause as Jimmy thought over what XRU had said, then a question arose. “Zaru, if the force field keeps everything out of Attalia, how do our ships get safely through?”

“In another moment or two you’ll be able to see,” Zaru said, as the walkway carried them past the power stations. “There you are,” he pointed. Jimmy’s eyes were guided to what looked like row upon row of enormous ray guns pointing upwards. Their swivel tips protruded above ground level.

“These are the field neutralisers. They encircle Attalia. Whenever an Attalian craft needs to pass through the force field it contacts Defence HQ and HQ sends a signal to punch a hole through the force field. That allows the craft to pass through safely. As soon as the neutraliser is switched off the force field automatically expands to plug the hole and total defence is restored.”

“Amazing.” was all that Jimmy could say in reply.

Zaru smiled, “I think we just have time before lunch to see one of our Laser Bases.”

Jimmy nodded enthusiastically, hitched XRU to a more comfortable position and tightened his grip on the walkway rail as it gathered speed beneath his feet. It carried them quickly through to the next brightly lit area and then slowed down to a walking pace again.

The whole area seemed to throb with pulses of multicoloured light which suddenly flashed and then dimmed, only to appear again a second or two later. The effect was weird. Each pulse outshone the already brightly lit suspended lights, adding its illumination to the darkness above.

They were carried further into the Laser Base before Jimmy could see that the

light pulses were created at the bottom of vertical glass tubes which climbed up into the darkness out of sight. Each pulse travelled up the tube in a succession only to disappear when it reached the roof of the cavern.

“These, Jimmy, are our laser weapon systems,” said Zaru. “They are spread out in underground caverns all around Attalia. What you see now is a laser on standby. When they’re used to fight off invaders the pulses of light get faster and brighter. Too bright to look at without some kind of eye protection.”

“Starship XR had a laser gun. It fired a fierce, crimson beam of light.”

“Well these laser beams are green and when they reach full power they shoot out intense pulses of energy. They’re specially adjusted to travel through the force field without damaging it.”

“But the Ocks who attacked me used a laser to break down XR’s force field.”

“Yes, thanks to your report we know about that now. However, we don’t think they’ve yet developed a powerful pulsed laser which could chop through Attalia’s defensive force field.”

“That sounds like good news,” said Jimmy.

“It is! But as soon as the Ock scientists develop a new weapon you can be sure Kursh will lead another attack against us. If we’re lucky our spies may give us warning of any new developments. Then we can prepare our defences. If we’re not so lucky - well, that’s what lasers are for. We don’t like using them, but when it is absolutely necessary we do, and woe betides any Ock on the receiving end. Total destruction is the penalty for attacking a non-aggressive planet like ours.”

Jimmy rather hoped he wouldn’t be around to see such a battle, but he had a feeling that sometime, somewhere, Kursh and he were destined to meet.

He was so busy dwelling on such dreaded prospects that he hardly noticed the

return journey to Rescue Base. He was certainly relieved when at last he saw again the clear blue sky. Sitting at a table by a window in Zaru's office he toyed absentmindedly with the food before him.

"I take it that you're impressed," said Zaru, interrupting Jimmy's thoughts, not quite understanding the gloom that clouded Jimmy's mind and showed in his eyes.

"Er! What!" he stammered, "Oh! Of course, I'm impressed, Zaru. It's a fantastic system for defence, attack and rescue."

"But?" queried Zaru.

"But," said Jimmy, "I have an awful feeling the Ocks know how to get through the force field."

"Now why do you think that?"

"Well," explained Jimmy, "The spacecraft that attacked XR were quite small but when they used three small blue laser beams together, they did manage to break through XR's force field. The power of the blue laser beams was combined to overcome a strong defence."

"What happens if they attack Attalia with much bigger spacecraft; each with a more powerful laser than I saw? It is possible that if they all fire their lasers together, aimed at the same point, they could break through even Attalia's force field."

"Not a thought I'd care to dwell on," said Zaru, "But I do think it should be discussed at the full council when we meet Alpha this afternoon. "Now that's enough talk of war. There is an hour or so free before we are due back at CHQ, so let's take a tour around our capital."

Chapter 38

Cosmotron Tour

The capital city of Attalia was called Cosmotron and aerial skyways radiated outwards to the surrounding towns. Great glass domes covered enormous tracts of land around the perimeter of the city. Zaru told Jimmy that they were vitamin and protein production units. In reality, they looked more like gigantic bubbles, rounded greenhouses. Some contained cereals; some vegetables; some fruit. Others housed animals: cows, pigs, sheep and hens. Each dome was individually controlled to provide ideal conditions for growing whatever was in it.

Adjacent to each dome was a processing factory and alongside that were digesters. All waste materials were channelled to the digesters and anything that was of use was extracted in the form of concentrated liquors which were recycled back to the processing factories. When everything reusable had been filtered out, the dry cake that remained was crushed to a powder and spread over the crops as a very rich fertiliser.

Closer to the city were several rings of oval sports stadiums, where every imaginable form of sport was catered for. A game was being played in one of the stadia which was packed with at least fifty thousand cheering spectators. The sound of cheering was intense. It sounded so exciting so Zaru parked the PT and took Jimmy into the stadium to watch for a while.

There were two teams of players, one dressed in white, the other in green. Seven

men on each side were standing on flat discs that hovered five or six centimetres above the highly polished, gold-coloured playing surface. By shifting their feet the players could tilt the discs and make them move in the direction of the tilt. They zoomed, hovered and then shot off, in what seemed to Jimmy, to be random directions. The playing surface was almost two hundred metres from end to end and blue lines marked the limits of play. At each end, the lines traced out a semicircle and there was a gap of about three metres in the centre portion.

“What are they doing?” he asked. “They seem to be chasing something, but what?”

Zaru explained. “The game is called Magnetron. The players try to capture or neutralise a magnetic sphere, called the Magnon, by surrounding it for ten seconds so that it cannot move. Each capture, or neutra, scores one point. When a team scores a point they are given an unopposed shot at the goal, from where they scored the neutra. They try to aim the Magnon into the entrance of their opponents Home Base. If they succeed in scoring, one point is deducted from the other side’s score.”

“But I can’t even see the magnon,” said Jimmy.

“That’s because you’re not looking in the right place,” Zaru said with a smile. “Look,” he said pointing to a corner of the central square playing area. “There it is, under the conducting surface.”

What Jimmy saw was a small round area of the yellow surface glowing red. The red magnon was surrounded by three white players, held stationary by their ring of force plates. The other four members of the ‘whites’ team attempted to keep the ‘greens’ away from the magnon by zigzagging in front of them.

A ‘green’ broke through the defence and as soon as his disc crossed and disturbed the triangle of ‘whites’ the magnon zoomed away and disappeared.

“It’s gone!” Jimmy said in surprise. Zaru laughed.

“Now they will have to find it again.”

The ‘greens’ and ‘whites’ criss-crossed the yellow surface on their discs until one of them passed close enough to the magnon to make it glow red again. Then the teams chased and jostled to surround it and hold it stationary.

The greens scored a neutra and the stadium erupted with cheering and shouting. The ‘whites’ retired to a neutral corner while the ‘greens’ surrounded the magnon. The crowd was silent. Suddenly one player moved away and the magnon shot out of the gap he had left in the circle. It sped at enormous speed under the surface, down to the ‘white’s’ home base. It passed straight through the narrow entrance and seemed to explode into patterns of vivid colours which spread over the playing surface like ripples on a pond.

The cheers of the crowd rose in a deafening crescendo, and then gradually subsided to a murmur. The teams lined up to begin another face-off and the game continued. After a while, Zaru took Jimmy back to the PT to continue their tour of Cosmotron.

The next hour flew by. All thoughts of impending danger vanished during their excursion around Attalia’s capital city. All too soon the PT glided off the skyway back into the rooftop park at CHQ.

Chapter 39

Council in Session

The full council meeting was in session. Alpha sat at the head of the startable and around him were gathered the seven Commander Generals. Zaru was on Alpha's left-hand side and continuing around the table were - Zon, responsible for food production and supply; Zar, Zan and Zee, who were responsible respectively for Fighter Commanders in Local Space, Deep Space and Time Warp Space; Zyn was next and he looked after Attalian law enforcement; next to Zyn on Alpha's right-hand side was Zenu who was in charge of all defence systems. Together they governed Attalia and in times of trouble, they formed the war council.

This particular meeting was more concerned with domestic issues, and while they discussed the general business of running a world like Attalia, Jimmy vacantly gazed out of the window, daydreaming. He wondered what his friends in Roombelow were doing. Was Gemma at work in the well; was Mr McDonald addressing some town meeting; what spell was Matilda conjuring up now? Only a day had passed since he had said goodbye but his heart was already heavy. How he missed those dear friends.

"And now," said Alpha loudly, interrupting Jimmy's daydream, "we come to a special item in today's programme."

Jimmy's attention switched to the conference table. No one noticed him. "You've all heard by now of how Jimmy McGellan returned to Attalia after many years on the planet Earth. He travelled back home thousands of light-years and in so doing fought

off an Ock attack single-handed. He was rescued by Zaru here, and I've made him an honorary Commander. Since then I've learned a little more about his many exploits and I believe he would make a useful addition to our general council. I, therefore, propose to promote him to Commander General, on an honorary basis and firmly believe he has a very important contribution to make. What is the feeling of the council?"

Zaru was first to speak and he gave a glowing report of all that he had learned about Jimmy since the rescue. "What is more," he continued, "his young mind has already foreseen possible danger from the new Ock lasers."

It didn't take long for the council to give their unanimous vote in favour of Jimmy becoming an Honorary Commander General.

"I fully expected your support," the smiling Alpha said. He got up, walked over to Jimmy and buckled the already prepared scarlet belt around his small waist. "Welcome to council Commander General."

That was it! No more discussion. Jimmy was accepted as an equal council member except that there was no permanent place for him at the council startable. Alpha pointed to a chair and Jimmy moved between Zaru and Zon.

The meeting continued, but now the discussion turned to defence matters. Jimmy was prompted by Zaru to repeat his account of the battle with the Ocks. He was certain they hadn't used pulsed laser beams. The council listened intently when he explained how larger Ock lasers could, possibly, breakthrough Attalia's force field, if several lasers were fired at the same time, at the same target.

A general buzz of conversation broke the silence that followed Jimmy's account. Zee addressed the meeting.

"Jimmy, I think you could be right. There has been a recent report from our spies,

which indicate that it's highly probable Kursh is planning such an attack. We had better declare an immediate state of emergency."

Zan, Zar and Zyn agreed.

Alpha nodded. "Zyn will make the necessary announcements to our people immediately after the meeting. In the meanwhile, Zenu, what can be done to prepare our defences if such an onslaught comes?"

Zenu replied. "It should be possible to increase the strength of the force field. We can use three generators instead of the usual two. I'm sure it can be done, but only for a short time."

"What's the problem?" asked Zaru. "Surely there are five generators available."

"Yes," said Zenu, "But there are only two accelerators. My men can hook up on extra generators and boost the accelerator outputs but the extra power could burn out the circuits."

"How long would you be able to run with the extra power?" asked Alpha.

"Well!" mused Zenu. "With extra cooling, the system could run for perhaps four or five hours without damaging the coils."

"All right," said Alpha. "See to it. All systems on full alert and be prepared to report back to CHQ at a minute's notice."

He rose from his chair, pushed it back into the star and the Commander Generals followed suit. Council was over and they left immediately to carry out their preparations. Only Alpha, Zaru and Jimmy remained. Alpha began to activate CHQ for the battle everyone expected. The problem was that no one knew when it would come.

Zaru took Jimmy over to the communications console and put out a call to Rescue Base. His call was answered by Commander Milo. "Rescue Base responding to

Commander General Zaru.”

“Milo, have you heard the general alert?”

“Just a few minutes ago, sir, but all rescue systems are operational.”

“Of course!” said Zaru. “However, its highly unlikely that we’ll need to launch any deep space rescue missions. All Attalian craft have been recalled to base before Zenu builds up the force field. Zee and Zar are combining their forces and will only attack if the Ocks break through the force field. I think our first rescues will be surface recoveries. What is our total number of surface rescue craft?”

Milo turned away from the console and could be seen to be pushing buttons on a computer. Within seconds he had the answer.

“One hundred surface rescue craft at the ready. A further twenty-five can be brought into service within two to three hours, and another ten within twenty-four hours. The rest! Well, perhaps the maintenance section could have them ready in a week.”

“Forget them,” said Zaru. “Concentrate efforts to get the others operational before morning.”

“Yes sir,” said Milo.

“Oh! and Milo,” said Zaru. “I’ll be back at base tomorrow morning at six o’clock to inspect.”

“Everything will be ready.”

“Commander General Zaru signing off.” And the screen went blank.

“I just hope we don’t need them,” sighed Zaru, his hand resting on Jimmy’s shoulder.

In the meanwhile, Alpha had been finalising details with Zyn and Zon for emergency food supplies to be distributed if the situation became critical. Then he

called up Zan who was the time warp specialist. "Zan. How much warning will we get if Kursh mounts a major attack from the Delta Region?" he asked.

"About three hours, Alpha," Zan replied. "Not much of a warning, but I'm afraid that we can't pick them up on radar until they pass through the Delta time warp."

"What about our spies on Ock?"

"I doubt if they'd be able to get through before Kursh. He knows there are spies on Ock and he'll keep any major build-up of forces a secret until the last possible moment."

"All right, Zan, we'll hold your fighters back on Attalia in reserve but keep an eye on the Delta Warp and let CHQ know at the first sign of activity."

"Yes sir," said Zan, and signed off.

Alpha then called in Zenu. "When do you think you can have the cooling system installed?"

"I've already got men working on it Alpha - we'll finish before morning."

"Good work Zenu," said Alpha, and signed off.

"Doesn't seem that we can do much more now," said Zenu. "Except hope the attack doesn't come too soon."

"Can you think of anything else, Jimmy?" asked Alpha.

Jimmy turned away from Zenu and walked slowly across to the window, his chin on his chest. He'd been so overcome by the ceremony a few minutes earlier that he'd hardly had time to take in all that had happened. Attalia's defences were well underway but there was something that didn't seem right.

"I've got it!" he cried, turning back to Alpha and Zenu. "I know what's wrong. You're so intent on defence that you've forgotten about the alternative. Attack!"

"Now then, Jimmy," chided Alpha. "You ought to know by now that we never go

out seeking conflict. It's unheard of for Attalians to attack without provocation. If we are left in peace then we will not destroy another's life."

"Oh! I agree with all that," said Jimmy. "but I don't mean attack Ock. I mean attack Kursh if he comes through the Delta warp."

"It would be too late," said Zaru. "They'd be halfway here before we could respond."

"No! No!" said Jimmy, now quite excited. "What we have to do is send the fastest ship we have through the warp right into the Delta region. There it keeps a lookout for the Ock forces. As soon as they approach it comes back to our side of the Delta warp and calls up our Fighter Command. Only one ship at a time can come through the time warp and Zan or Zee can pick them off as they come through. Even if we don't get them all it'll give you more time to prepare our defences against them."

Zaru and Alpha were stunned by Jimmy's plan. The logic was simple but over many thousands of years, their minds had been trained and tuned to defend, not attack.

Alpha looked at Zaru as realisation dawned.

Zaru confirmed his thoughts. "It's a brilliant idea, Alpha."

"All right," admitted Alpha. "Recall council."

Many of the Commander Generals were still in the building and within thirty minutes council was reconvened, except for Zenu who had to oversee defence preparations.

It needed all the persuasion of Alpha, Zenu and Jimmy to make them realise that Jimmy's plan could work. Enthusiasm was high and both Zee and Zan offered to cross the Delta Warp. Jimmy persuaded the council that it was more important for them to mount the attack on the Attalian side of the warp. Zan's fighter commands would be

kept on Attalia as a last defence should Kursh break through the force field.

“My Commanders can handle any rescue without me,” said Zaru. “I propose that I be the one to enter the Delta region to give an early warning.”

“Fine!” said Alpha.

“No, it's not!” said Jimmy. “I thought of the plan and I insist I go with Zaru.”

Alpha knew he would not be able to change Jimmy's mind and reluctantly agreed to him going with Zaru.

“But let me first clear the plan with Zenu,” he said.

Alpha moved over to the communications panel whilst discussion continued around the table about the finer details of strategy. When he returned his glum expression silenced the meeting.

“It seems that there is one major drawback to your plan,” he said. “Zenu has explained that once the force field strength is increased any Attalian craft left outside will not be able to get back in. The field neutralisers will not be strong enough to punch holes through it, and obviously, we can't use pulsed lasers because then the Ocks would be able to get through. Any of our fighters cut off will have to survive on their own until after the battle.”

“That's a risk we're all prepared to take President Alpha.” Zaru spoke for every Commander General.

“And that's the reply I expected of my Commander Generals. Now go! We don't know how long we've got and minutes could be vital.”

The Commander Generals dispersed for the second time, the urgency of their tasks lending unhurried speed to their actions.

Chapter 40

Battle of Delta Warp

Flying through the blackness of deep space in SX, the fastest, most sophisticated fighter starship in the fleet, Jimmy's mind could hardly recall the exact circumstances of how he came to be approaching the Delta Region time warp. Zaru was at the flight controls of SX and XRU was plugged into the onboard computer. Following, about two hours behind were Zan and Zee, each in command of twenty of the best men in their best available fighter starships. They would be lying in wait for the Ocks and would attempt to pick them off one at a time as they passed through the time warp.

Time flew by and soon Zaru asked Jimmy to prepare SX for time warp approach.

"XRU!" he called. "Prepare for the approach to Delta Region time warp. Once we're through, bring SX to a safe position and put all systems on alert."

XRU took over and carefully adjusted the speed and alignment of SX. Had it not been for a momentary blackness they'd never have known they had passed through the warp into Delta space.

A moment later XRU announced, "Flight suspended and all systems on alert."

Zaru turned the radar towards Ock and boosted the gain to increase sensitivity. "Now all we have to do is wait. XRU will inform us of the first signs of activity, so you can turn in Jimmy and get some rest. I'll prepare a return flight path and then join you."

Jimmy's seat reclined into a more comfortable position but tired though he was, sleep was far away.

Zaru soon finished his tasks and he too lay back in his seat. "Too excited for

sleep, Jimmy?" he asked, looking over at the very much wide awake Jimmy. Jimmy nodded. "Well," said Zaru, "let's take our minds off the job for a while. Why not tell me more about your life on Earth."

As Jimmy told Zaru more about his life in the underground world of Roombelow his heart ached. The memories of his many friends flooded over him. I think it was around then that he realised he would have to go back to them. Attalia had a whole new world to offer but it didn't seem to matter. What was more important was that he had friends, a home and love in Roombelow and he had no intentions of deserting them. But first, he would give his every ounce of strength, his life if need be, to help Attalia overcome the evil Kursh.

His words trailed off and Zaru smiled as Jimmy drifted into a contented sleep. He guessed that Jimmy missed his Earth friends, by the way, he had talked about them. I think he also knew that Jimmy would, one day, return to them.

Zaru settled himself comfortably for what he thought would be a long vigil. He dozed off but his dreams were rudely interrupted.

"Alien craft taking off from Ock," announced XRU.

Zaru responded quickly. His seat shot to an upright position and he glanced at the radar screen. "How many?" he asked.

"Twenty so far but their numbers are increasing."

Jimmy was now wide awake too, his eyes glued to the ever-increasing number of blips on the screen. Now there were at least fifty Ock craft heading towards the Delta warp and more following.

"They're moving too soon," said Jimmy, glancing at the flight deck clock.

"Trust Kursh to mount an attack in the middle of the night," said Zaru.

"The forcefield won't be ready until morning. Will we be able to hold them off until

then?" Jimmy's question was left unanswered.

"Well there's nothing we can do here," said Zaru. "Come on we'll have to warn Zee and Zan."

Even as Zaru re-activated SX and handed over control to XRU, the radar blips were continuing to grow in strength and numbers. The invasion forces were gathering for the onslaught on Attalia.

The instant XRU guided SX through the warp Zaru was reporting to Zee, Zan and Alpha at CHQ.

Alpha asked that Zee and Zan marshal their command to give Zenu as much time as possible to increase their forcefield strength.

Zee lined up his twenty fighter starships around the time warp.

Zan's forces spread out like a web to catch any Ock craft that managed to get past Zee's first line of fighters.

Zee's voice crackled on the communication channel. "How many Ocks are coming," he asked Zaru, "and how long before they reach the warp?"

"By the time we'd got to the warp there were more than one hundred Ocks already airborne."

"And more were taking off to join them," interjected Jimmy.

"Estimated time of arrival 0100 hours," confirmed XRU.

"We have an hour to wait, Zee," reported Zaru.

"I'll warn Zan," said Zee. "We'll be ready for them. May I advise you to return to Attalia now with Commander General McGellan."

"You may advise us but we won't go," said Jimmy, emphatically.

"But Jimmy" pleaded Zee.

"That's all right Zee," said Zaru. "We'll take up a safe position behind Zan."

“We’ll act as an observation post,” said Jimmy.

“All right,” conceded Zee. “But keep out of the way of our fighters. They are highly trained professional pilots. They’ll not want their tactics disturbed by amateurs.”

“Amateurs indeed!” snorted Jimmy. Zaru couldn’t help smiling at Jimmy’s indignant reluctance to leave the battle area and he asked XRU to take them to a safe back up position, behind Zan.

At precisely one o’clock in the morning, the first Ock craft emerged through the Delta warp. At the same instant, it was obliterated by the crimson laser fire from Zee’s fighter starship. Within the first five minutes of battle, twenty Ocks disappeared in the destruction of the orange fireballs as Zee’s fighters picked them off, one by one.

It must have taken Kursh a few minutes to realise his invasion forces were being wiped out on the other side of the warp, and he changed tactics. The Ocks started to come through the time warp in quicker and quicker succession.

A few Ocks managed to escape the first trap but they were quickly mopped up by Zan. The pace quickened even more and tactics changed again.

Now, nose to tail the Ocks spurted out of the dark mount of the Delta region, green lasers firing as they wheeled, the first ship left, the second ship right, and then up and then down.

More and more were escaping the first trap. Zan’s forces were now deployed as independent units - each searching for individual targets. The blackness of space was criss-crossed with blue and crimson laser fire and the fireballs of death were gradually reducing the Attalian forces. Twice Zaru engaged Ocks who tried to head towards Attalia and twice he stopped them.

Zee’s voice sounded on all channels “Retreat and reform around Zan as one force.”

The Attalian starfighters extracted themselves from battle and retreated towards their home. A mere fifteen were left. Some fifty Ocks were now regrouping to protect the warp and they were soon joined by more of their forces.

Jimmy could see their task was hopeless. He didn't think the field force would be ready in time. He opened the communication channel. "This is Jimmy McGellan," he announced. "We must delay the Ocks for at least half an hour. We are greatly outnumbered and the only line of defence left is to attack while the Ocks think they've beaten us off. Who goes with me?"

The communication channel almost exploded with the sound of accord from the other fourteen starfighters.

"I'll lead," said Zee. "Let's see if we can keep them busy for another thirty minutes. When I sound the attack we go in together. After the first sweep, it is every man for himself. Alpha will sound general recall the moment he knows we've won him sufficient time to strengthen the forcefield. When recall comes, make for the base at maximum speed. Any man left outside the forcefield will have to fend for himself -.and now -. all remaining forces -. attack!"

In unison, the Attalian fighters sped back on their suicidal mission. The Ocks were taken completely by surprise, and at least twenty were destroyed by the phalanx of starships led by Zee.

After the initial burst of scarlet lasers, the Attalians broke ranks and weaved their way in and out of the Ocks wreaking total havoc.

In the ensuing pandemonium, ten of the Ock fighters collided with each other and another twenty or so were destroyed in the dogfights that followed.

Jimmy was just a passenger in SX as Zaru expertly skirmished with stray Ocks. Jimmy lost count of how many orange fireballs they flew through, and how many blue

laser beams narrowly missed SX. On two occasions Zaru had to take prompt evasive action as Ocks attacked from the rear.

Both Jimmy and Zaru were very much relieved when at last Alpha triggered the general recall to Attalia.

XRU took over control and applied maximum acceleration towards base and home. Within minutes they were joined by the few remaining starfighters. Five! Only another five survivors.

Zan asked for a roll call. Zee did not answer. "Has anyone seen Commander General Zee?" he asked.

"Commander Jano reporting," came the reply. "I saw Commander General Zee just before the recall. He was engaging three Ocks in a skirmish. The last I saw he was chasing them into deep space."

"Well if anyone knows their way about deep space its Zee. I don't think we need to worry. He'll not be able to make it back through the forcefield but I'm sure he'll be all right."

And the remaining five sped back towards Attalia.

Chapter 41

War of Attalia

The Ocks did not pursue the retreating Attalian force. They were too busy regrouping their forces in readiness for the full invasion that would shortly follow.

Zaru updated Alpha on the situation. Zenu was confident that the force field could be boosted in good time. Alpha expressed his sorrow about the casualties and the fact that Zee was missing but requested they all report directly to CHQ on landing.

Meanwhile, Zan had been checking the build-up of the Ock forces and he made his report direct to Alpha. Zaru and Jimmy listened in. Despite all their efforts, there were now even more Ock craft coming through the delta warp, and the last few ships to pass through were enormous craft. Zan guessed, correctly as it turned out, that those were the pulsed laser carriers.

Half an hour later Zan again contacted Alpha. "The invasion force is on its way."

XRU chattered. "Estimated time of arrival 06:05."

"Only five minutes to spare," murmured Zaru. "That's what I call cutting it fine."

It was with some relief that the five eventually landed safely back at base. Jano was sent to get medical attention. He had sustained severe burns in the battle. The rest; Zaru, Zan, Jimmy and XRU and the two remaining Commanders, Arlos and Kein, went directly to CHQ to report to Alpha.

Alpha listened intently to the brief account of the battle. His brow creased when Zan told him about the enormous laser carriers.

“How many were there?” he asked.

“Only three or four but there could be more now,” said Zan.

Zaru was already at the radar console.

“It’s difficult to tell from this,” he said peering into the screen. “They’re grouped so tightly I can’t distinguish individual ships.”

Alpha contacted Zenu at Defence HQ and outlined the problem. “Can you improve radar response?”

“Yes, but only if I reduce the area being scanned,” replied Zenu.

“Well do it immediately. As soon as I’ve completed the scan, go back onto a wide area scan.”

The radar was momentarily focused, at full intensity, on the rapidly approaching Ocks.

“There,” said Alpha. “Five carriers and about two hundred fighters. All right Zenu, we’ve seen enough.” The radar went back to scanning the wider area. “Five,” he muttered. “But just how powerful are they?”

No one answered. No one could answer.

“All right!” He snapped back into life. “Zan, take your men back to base. As soon as they are recovered join Zar. He’s organising our ground forces in case Kursh does breakthrough. Zaru and Jimmy stay here at CHQ. The rescue services won’t be needed unless the Ocks overcome the force field. Arrange with Zenu to have all available lasers to cover the area wherever the Ocks attack - but on no account fire unless they destroy the force field.”

Jimmy followed Zaru around CHQ, watching closely as he carried out Alpha’s instructions. Alpha was checking out all systems for the umpteenth time.

“There’s nothing else we can do now,” he said. “Ten minutes left before the Ocks

reach the force field. Zenu is building up the power now. Let us all take some refreshment before the action starts.”

In complete silence, each with his innermost thoughts, they sat around, waiting. No one felt hungry. Their stomachs had tightened in preparation for the final battle. Their throats were dry with apprehension.

Zenu’s voice interrupted the uneasy quiet. “Forcefield strength now at maximum power. The Ock laser carriers are slowing down.”

They all moved to the radar screen. The Ock carriers had stopped and were manoeuvring into position. Their flanks were protected by nearly one hundred fighters. The rest were dispersed all around Attalia.

The first carrier threw out a blue laser toward the force field, which glowed a dull red as it deflected the energy of the laser. Then it was joined by a second and third laser until all five were firing at a single point on the force field.

Slowly their blue beams began to pulse, on and off. They increased power and the force field in that part of the sky became white-hot.

There was nothing Alpha could do. He could only hope the force field would hold. He checked again with Zenu. The new cooling system on the accelerators was working, but the heat build-up was quicker than he had originally estimated. “Alpha,” he said. “We won’t be able to hold this power level for five hours. The best I can give is probably three hours.”

“We’ll just have to hope that’s long enough,” said Alpha. “Keep me informed of the situation at regular intervals.”

The Ocks continued their ceaseless laser barrage. After an hour Kursh was cursing his commanders. “What’s the holdup?” he bellowed. “My scientists promised we’d breakthrough in no more than ten or fifteen minutes.”

His Chief of Staff, Kaz, reported. "The Attalian force field must have been strengthened but not to worry as it will not be able to hold off our pulsed lasers for much longer."

But it did! An hour later Kursh was almost tearing out his non-existent hair. "Increase power!" he screamed at Kaz. Kaz obeyed and the five laser carriers applied maximum power. Their laser beams beat down on the force field but still, it held against their power and another hour passed by.

"Kaz!" commanded Kursh. "Bring every single laser to bear and get more power out of the carriers."

"Sir," said Kaz. "We'll overrun the generators on the carriers."

"Then overrun them," snarled Kursh. "But break through that force field."

And the Ocks applied the maximum power at their disposal.

"They're increasing power again," Alpha said, calmly. "Zenu, how much longer can we hold them off?"

"I can keep the accelerators going at their current rate for thirty minutes. If I increase the power now we'll blow everything up in ten minutes."

"Its all or nothing," responded Alpha. "Do it Zenu!"

The invisible stream of energy feeding the force field was increased. The noise of the screeching underground generators could be heard all over Attalia. The heat from the white-hot battle zone could be felt even on the planet's surface. The streets were lined with thousands of Attalian citizens, heads strained upwards, watching the battle of force and energy.

"Another five minutes and we've had it," reported Zenu.

"Keep it up!" commanded Alpha, and more minutes ticked away.

"Look," said Jimmy. "One of their carriers has stopped firing."

Simultaneously Kursh was demanding to know why.

His answer came within seconds. With an enormous blast, the first carrier disintegrated, hurling the others across the sky.

“Retreat,” screamed Kaz. “The lasers are blowing.”

Kursh was well out of the way but many of his fighters were destroyed by the exploding carriers. The carrier power generators just could not sustain maximum power any longer. In the face of failure, the Ocks turned and ran, following their leader, retreating, back to the Delta Region.

“Zenu. Shut everything down! Power Off!” commanded Alpha urgently, and the sound of screeching generators gradually died away, and relief spread over their faces.

Zenu reported. “No damage Alpha, but one more minute and we’d have blown ourselves into eternity.”

“Thanks, Zenu,” replied Alpha. “You managed to hold them off - that’s all that matters.”

“Shall I sound the all-clear?” queried Zaru.

“Yes,” said a weary Alpha. “The Ocks won’t be back for a while but I wonder if they know how close they came to breaking through.”

Jimmy was watching their flight on the radar. “Won’t they give up now?” he asked.

“Not the Ocks,” said Zaru sadly with an arm around Jimmy’s shoulder. “They never give up. They’ve been attacking Attalia for hundreds of years. Kursh will never be happy until he rules the Universe. Wherever there is life, he’ll seek it out and overpower it if he can!” And then he paused. “What’s that?” he asked pointing at a blip on the radar. “It’s coming in fast.”

XRU computed. “Commander General Zee approaching rapidly from deep

space.”

“He’s safe,” sighed Jimmy.

“Never doubted it,” smiled Zaru, secretly relieved.

“Get Zar to send out a squadron to escort him home,” said Alpha. “And have him report here on arrival.”

Jimmy, now familiar with CHQ systems, gladly responded.

“Now let’s eat,” said Alpha. “And later we must catch up on some rest. We’ve all had a busy night.”

Zar joined them later, after breakfast, and they recalled the last day’s events much relieved that it was all over and finished.

“If only it was all over,” said Jimmy between mouthfuls of egg, “but from what Zaru said, it can only be a matter of time before they try again.”

“And who knows what evil scheme that twisted mind will hatch next,” said Alpha. “We must always be on guard, prepared at all times.”

“Will he not listen to reason?” asked Jimmy. “It’s so stupid. Kursh has lost half an army. What a senseless loss of life.”

“Kursh won’t reason,” interrupted Alpha. “Many times we’ve sent ambassadors to plead for peace but they never came back. Once on Ock - a lifetime on Ock is what we’ve come to expect.”

“Well, perhaps you’re right,” admitted Jimmy, but his young mind was working overtime. There must be a way, he thought. There must be a way.

He slept an exhausted sleep but it was not a contented sleep. His mind was still working overtime, determined not to admit defeat. “There must be a way.” he murmured in his restless dream.

Chapter 42

Close Delta Warp

Jimmy woke with a start. The light was still bright outside his window. It was two o'clock in the afternoon. He hadn't slept more than three hours. His bones were aching and he was still thinking, *there must be a way*, as he showered. The refreshing spray of the shower helped wash away the aches and his brain slowly cleared.

"XRU! How can we stop this stupid war?" he asked, pulling on his battle tunic.

XRU responded. "It seems that Kursh will not negotiate, not while he thinks he can overcome Attalian defences. Perhaps the losses the Ocks incurred in this last attack may open their eyes. The enemy is more likely to negotiate after a heavy defeat."

Jimmy shrunk-fit his silver uniform and buckled on his scarlet belt. "I think we should ask Alpha to let us try," he said pulling on his red boots.

"Alpha will not allow you to risk your life on such a mission," crackled XRU. "Nor do I advise it."

"There's always an element of risk in the search for peace, so we must work out a plan to minimise it." Jimmy sat on a chair and closed his eyes, deep in thought. "Surely we'd be safe as long as didn't land on Ock?" he suggested.

"Kursh would keep you talking and send up a squadron to capture you."

"If he did that we could make a run for it. He wouldn't dare send his men through the Delta warp again."

"Do not underestimate what Kursh would do," warned XRU. "You must be

prepared for every possibility,” he added.

“Is there no way of blocking the time warp?” asked Jimmy.

“Not known. Time warps are invisible gateways between deep space regions. They have no form. They just exist. No known force can cut off the passage of time.”

“So we can’t block it,” mused Jimmy. There was a further pause. “What if the warp was destroyed?”

“Delta region would be completely sealed off, for all time, from all other regions of space.”

“And who rules the Delta region?”

“Kursh.”

“Well then only the Ocks would be affected, and it would stop them making further attacks on Attalia,” said Jimmy.

“Correct,” said XRU. “However, I cannot compute a method for destroying a time warp.”

“That’s all right,” said Jimmy. The faintest glimmer of a plan was forming.

“Come on! We’ve got to see Alpha.”

Alpha was back at CHQ. He had rested for only an hour and was already planning how to improve Attalia’s defences against the day the Ocks would surely attack again.

“Hello, Jimmy,” he said. “I thought you’d have slept on until tomorrow morning after such a busy night.”

“I’m recovered now Alpha. I couldn’t sleep any longer. XRU and I have been working on a plan to stop Kursh once and for all.”

“Negative!” chimed XRU. “No details finalised to achieve that objective.”

“Well?” asked Alpha.

“XRU’s right. I do have a plan but I need some help in working out the details.”

Jimmy gave Alpha a brief outline of his idea. First to attempt to negotiate with Kursh from space and if that failed, to retreat and destroy the Delta Warp.

“And how do you propose to destroy a gateway in time?” asked Alpha.

“No method is known,” said XRU.

“You’re just not programmed to think that way XRU. Just because a time warp has never been destroyed does not mean it can’t be.” He turned to Alpha who shrugged his shoulders and said, “I must admit I’ve never thought about it. Let’s call a full council and see if anyone else has.”

Half an hour later council was in full session. Zan and Zee were considered the experts, both of them used warps regularly on their patrols but neither of them had given any thought to the idea.

“All we do is pass through the warps,” explained Zan, “to get from one side of space to the other in the fastest possible time.”

“Hasn’t anyone ever stopped in a warp? On the inside, so to speak?” asked Jimmy.

“Too dangerous,” said Zaru. “It takes all our skill to align our ships for a correct approach. Any error, even a fraction of a degree, and there’s no telling where you’d end up.”

“In nether space,” said Zan. “The space that runs alongside our time, but always out of step. There’s no return from nether space.”

“Yes, I know. XRU explained it when he brought me here from Earth; but for my plan to work I have to be able to stop - right in the centre of the Delta Warp.”

A succession of gasps came from around the council star.

“And what do you propose to do there?” asked Zaru.

“Set off an explosive charge to shift the warp,” said Jimmy confidently, although

in reality, the idea had only just occurred.

There was a sort of stunned silence. Then a period of mutual dawning. Suddenly the idea was communal. Each was furiously calculating the chances of success and comparing results with his neighbour.

Alpha allowed the exchange of ideas to flow for a few minutes and called his Commander generals to order. "What," he asked, "is the general view? Have you reached a consensus?"

Zenu replied. "It would seem that Jimmy's plan is sound. A carefully controlled burst of pulsed laser energy could swing the Delta Warp away from our region of space-time. It would have to be positioned exactly at the centre and be triggered with a time delay. The passage of time is just another form of energy and if we use exactly the right amount of laser energy, ... perhaps we can give it just enough of a kick to change its direction."

For the next hour or so the largest available computers on Attalia were commandeered for the enormous task. Every little detail had to be exact. There was no room for error. As soon as the details had been checked and double-checked the plans were put into action.

Only the best scientists were allowed the privilege of constructing the laser charge device. It had to be self-powered. It had to be small. It had to be symmetrical. And it had to work the first time.

At nine o'clock precisely the device was delivered to CHQ. A perfect sphere of quartz. The outer casing was optically translucent, obscuring the miniature electronics inside. It lay on the council star, an object of awe. Alongside it was the transmitter whose signal would activate the release of the precise pulsed laser charge.

"Now we have it," said Alpha, "and the computers have confirmed that it is

possible to stop at the centre of a warp, it only remains to decide who tackles the task.”

“There’s nothing to decide Alpha,” said Zaru. “Jimmy and I will do it.” Jimmy’s heart hurt as it swelled with pride. “Together, Commander General Jimmy McGellan and I have formed an excellent understanding of each other. His heart is set on this mission, which may well be his last, but -!” And he turned, pleadingly to Alpha. “Don’t deny him his chance.”

Alpha turned away, his face stern. While he considered Zaru’s plea, Jimmy reflected on Zaru’s words. “A mission which may well be his last.” Then he knew that Zaru knew. If they were successful Jimmy had resolved to return to Roombelow.

“Agreed!” said Alpha, coming back to the council star. “Zaru and Jimmy will first attempt to negotiate a peaceful settlement with Kursh. If, and only if, that fails then they set off the device in the Delta Warp.”

Murmurs of agreement followed. “I suggest the two of you turn in for tonight and report back here for six hundred hours tomorrow morning.

“Zar, Zee and Zan will prepare a flight programme for XRU and we’ll update his memory banks tomorrow. Zon and Zyn will help me work out how, or if, we can negotiate with Kursh. Now off you go! ... until morning.”

And the pair took leave of council and walked down the crystal corridor hand in hand. No words were needed.

Chapter 43

Victory Celebrations

Jimmy plugged the portable computer into the starship's control console and XRU guided starship SX through the Delta warp with his usual precision. It was ten hundred hours. Zaru and Jimmy had been thoroughly briefed. Alpha hoped they had covered every possibility but he knew they could not be anywhere near as devious as Kursh and his cronies. There was hope but no certainty.

XRU brought SX to a halt at a point midway between the Delta Warp and planet Ock. Zaru had been checking the specially prepared and tuned radar in case of an immediate attack. None came. "Probably still licking their wounds," he said.

"Hope so," said Jimmy.

"Communication channel is set up," interrupted XRU.

"Here we go then," said Zaru. "Let's put the first phase into operation." He flipped the transmitter switch and called up Ock.

"This is Commander General Zaru of Attalia, accompanied by Commander General McGellan. Together we are ambassadors on a peaceful mission. We seek to negotiate with Kursh. Please respond."

Silence. Complete silence was the only response.

Zaru waited a full minute and then repeated his announcement which was heard on every radio receiver on Ock.

Still, there was no response. Jimmy kept a watch on the radar screen for the first signs of an attempted surprise attack. Nothing happened.

Zaru was halfway through his third message repeat when Kursh replied.

"This is Kursh, ruler of Ock and lord of all in the Delta regions. I hear you Zaru. You must know the futility of your mission. What can you possibly offer me in return for peace? Nothing!" He'd started talking calmly but, as he continued, his scorn came through. "Whereas, I, in return for ruling over Attalia, can enforce peace and put an end to the war."

"We don't need your sort of peace Kursh. The people of Attalia will never submit to your cruel rule."

"One day, soon, you'll have no choice."

Jimmy spotted that three or four Ocks had taken off and were heading towards them. He broke into the dialogue. "Call off your men Kursh. Listen to us or the consequences will be severe and final."

Kursh laughed derisively. "Is that the voice of McGellan? Why you sound no more than a boy. Is that the best that Alpha can send, and it dares to issue ultimatums to me - Kursh of Ock."

"Kursh," said Jimmy calmly, "don't force our hand. You'll only regret it. All we seek is your undertaking never to attack Attalia again. You'll never break down our defences anyway."

"Don't you believe it," bellowed Kursh. "We're already preparing lasers ten times more powerful than anything you've ever seen. The next time we won't fail. Even if I have to lose half my army again ... I won't fail the next time. Attack!" he screamed at his fighters. "Attack and destroy!"

It was useless. Kursh was incapable of reaching a peaceful agreement. What evil force drove him on, and on, fuelling his mad desire for power?

Zaru responded quickly and turned SX around, pointing towards the Delta Warp.

“Over to XRU,” he said, and XRU began to carry out his programmed instructions. Phase two was underway.

SX accelerated and approached Delta Warp at a phenomenal speed under maximum power. Just when it seemed they would hurtle straight through the warp XRU applied full reverse thrust. The effect of the sudden deceleration shook starship SX, the point of almost breaking apart under the strain. The vibration inside was on the edge of being tolerable. Both Jimmy and Zaru blacked out, momentarily losing consciousness, as SX shrieked virtually to a dead stop.

Had it not been for XRU’s insistent call of, “Begin phase three, immediately,” the pair may have lapsed into total unconsciousness.

Jimmy pulled himself together, switched on the outside lights and began to operate the already unfolded robot arms. Zaru, still dazed, checked the approach of the Ock fighters. “We’ve no more than five minutes before they catch us up.”

The robot arms under Jimmy’s guidance opened the hatch at the rear of SX. Carefully the globe containing the laser charge was lifted out. Then began the nail-biting search for the exact centre of the Delta Warp. Zaru activated the onboard sonar and an outline of the warp appeared on-screen.

“It’s much bigger than we ever thought it was, Jimmy. No wonder it’s so easy to get lost in a warp. We’re about 50 metres away from the centre.”

XRU acted on the sonar information and edged SX closer to the centre of the hole in time.

“That’s it,” said Jimmy. “I can reach it now,” and he gently released the globe so that it was suspended in the exact centre of the warp.

“Line us up for a quick getaway,” said Zaru to XRU, who, as always carried out his instructions unerringly.

“The Ocks are on us,” shouted Jimmy. “Activate the orb and let’s get out of here.”

Even as SX started to move forward the laser energy was beginning to light up the blackness behind them with brilliant pulses of energetic yellow photons.

They emerged from the warp and just as suddenly the flashes of optical energy were cut off. Light could not penetrate outside of the warp.

SX was brought about by XRU just in time to see two Ock craft burst through the warp, wandering wildly. Jimmy expected to see the others following but they had already been swallowed up by the twisted space-time warp.

The Ock pilots had been temporarily blinded and as soon as they realised they were on their own they began their mad dash back to what they thought was safety. Zaru tried desperately to warn them but the communications system had been damaged. Anyway, nothing could have stopped their headlong flight.

They disappeared into the blackness of the time warp and were never seen again.

“Let’s finish our task and then we can head home,” said Zaru. The final phase, phase four of their mission, was relatively straightforward. All they had to do was to mark the entrance to the warp with a beacon. This would serve as a warning that the Delta Warp was now destroyed and had to be given a wide berth.

XRU took them home at a much more leisurely pace and gradually the tensions that battle brings, subsided. The worry was replaced with elation. They couldn’t share the news with Alpha yet because of the broken radio.

“It’s over,” said Zaru. “It’s finally over. Attalia owes you a tremendous debt of gratitude, Jimmy. Even though she doesn’t know it yet.”

Jimmy shrugged off the praise. “Teamwork Zaru. Lots of people pulled together to make the plan work, and I’m just one of the team.”

“All right Jimmy, I won’t embarrass you further, but without you to point the team

in the new direction, the war between Ock and Attalia would have probably gone on forever, or until Kursh finally ruled Attalia.”

The conversation paused, and Jimmy turned to Zaru. “You know, don’t you?”

“Yes. I think I know Jimmy,” he said sadly. “I guessed that despite our welcome to Attalia your real home is where you’ve already made it. Back on Earth.”

“But how do I tell Alpha?”

“Don’t you worry your head about that. I’ll explain it to him.” And the two were still holding hands when XRU landed SX at Rescue Base. Jimmy unplugged XRU, threw him over his shoulder and followed Zaru across the tarmac to a waiting PT. The Base was strangely deserted as were the skyways and pedestrian areas as they glided silently towards CHQ.

They were just beginning to get a little worried when CHQ came into sight. It was surrounded; surrounded by what looked like the total population of the City. The air shook with their rapturous cheers when Zaru and Jimmy came into sight. Alpha and all the Commander Generals were waiting on the rooftop park to greet them.

“But how did you know we’d succeeded?” asked Jimmy between the breathtaking hugs that Alpha gave him.

“The warning beacon of course!” shouted Zan above the roar of the crowd.

“As soon as we saw it we knew you’d succeeded,” explained Alpha. He turned to Zon and Zyn. “Make your announcements,” he said.

They held up their hands to silence the chanting crowd and the noise gradually died away.

“From now on, this day is a national day of remembrance. An extra public holiday in memory of the end of the war, brought about by Commander Generals Zaru and McGellan,” announced Zyn.

“What is more,” announced Zan. “It is to be a public feast day and President Alpha will provide the food and drink, freely to all.”

The crowd roared their approval.

Alpha stepped forward and stilled them again. “A day like this has to have a special name and to remind us all of the deeds of Zaru and Jimmy we shall call it Freedom Day. The first day that Attalians can live in freedom from fear of the Ocks.”

Zaru interrupted and whispered to Alpha. Alpha nodded.

“At the request of Zaru, we rename this day McGellan Day.” And the crowd took up the chant. “McGellan! McGellan!”

Side by side Zaru and Jimmy waved their thanks to the crowd before following Alpha and his Generals down into CHQ. The crowd slowly dispersed to begin their preparations for the feast.

Sitting around the council star Alpha led his team into the celebratory meal with gusto! Congratulations flowed back and forth. The story was recounted several times until every detail was burned in their memories.

The party continued long into the afternoon and Jimmy was quite grateful when Zaru gently and quietly guided him out of CHQ. The PT took them back to Rescue Base where Zaru had SX prepared for Jimmy’s homeward flight.

Jimmy was pleased that Zaru had arranged for a quiet departure. He had had enough of crowds for a while. But parting is never easy. Zaru did his brusque best to keep it light-hearted. Not until SX was a mere speck in the sky did he allow a happy and yet proud tear to escape.

Jimmy too had shed a tear. Once a boy with no friends he was now a young man with families on both sides of the skies. His memories of Attalia were cut short.

“Approaching Gamma warp now,” chattered XRU chirpily.

Well, you don't think Jimmy could have left XRU behind. Do you?

And with his usual precision, XRU guided them safely through the Gamma time warp and continued on-course for Earth, and Roombelow, and Mr McDonald, and Gemma, and Matilda and Amanda and contented sleep heightened the pleasure of adventures that were yet to come.

Jimmy Crikey was almost home.

THE END

Mirror, mirror on the wall

It doesn't matter if you're short or tall,

If your legs are skinny or your waist is wide,

It only matters what's inside.

Blue eyes, brown eyes black or green

What make you beautiful cannot be seen.

When I look at you I don't judge your parts.

The best thing about you in your hearts.

Unattributed,

What makes a person beautiful, is what shines out from inside.