



Other books by Brian D. McCoy

**My Adventures with Chickenspike
Return to the Elves
Red**

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Chapter 1

My Day of Reckoning

The moment I stepped out my front door, a nervous knot looped about my stomach squeezing tight and making it difficult to take a full breath. It was one of those knots you get when you just know that a pounding is on its way to greet you. I left the safety of my front porch. I was only a block and a half from my fourth grade classroom at Sunny Hill Elementary School. I walked fast, trying not to think about Sheldon Slack.

“Chase Althea!” Sheldon commanded. “Halt and bow to your king!”
I stopped.

The sixth grade bully had the girth of royalty, but Sheldon was no king. He had dirty blonde hair that looked like a loosely wrung mop turned upside down. Sheldon stood before me. He looked me square in the eye and grinned. It was a regal grin. One that said, *“I am going to pound the snot right out of you.”*

I felt the shakes beginning in the tips of my toes. Soon they would take over my entire body. Sheldon’s grin widened, showing a big toothy cavern of decay. He swung his fist hitting me right in the belly; right in my nervous knot. I doubled over, rolling off the sidewalk and onto soft dirt. A single tear pushed its way out from behind my eyelid.

I wanted to say something clever; something that would let him know that it was not cool for a sixth grader to punch a fourth grader. But, I could hardly breathe. Besides, that would just make Sheldon laugh.

When I did finally find enough air to speak, my voice sounded pinched off and squeaky. “Why Sheldon, what a lovely day in your kingdom. How may I be of service to your majesty?”

“I think you was lying when you gave me them smartness pills! I flunked my math test yesterday!”

“Your majesty, may I have permission to speak?”

Sheldon’s overgrown foot kicked dirt into my face. “Speak up, peasant!”

“Well, your royalness, you’ve only been taking those pills for three weeks. It takes quite a while before the pills start working. I bet you’ll be getting smarter real soon.”

“You know what I think?” Sheldon was so mad spit was spraying out from between his chapped lips. “I think that them weren’t smartness pills at all. I think they are rabbit pellets!”

I pushed myself to my feet. “See, you’re getting smarter already! I think those pills are starting to work!”

Sheldon smiled. “You think?”

Then it hit him. Sheldon realized I was making fun of him; that I had fed him rabbit food. His mouth dropped open. He stood there gaping in the morning sunlight.

I lost no time. My legs moved in a blur, kicking up a cloud of dust. Sheldon did his best to get his roly-poly body in motion. But it was no use; I was gone.

Sheldon let out a howl of fury. “I’ll get you Chase Althea!”

Chapter 2

Laying Low

I didn't stop running until I reached the black top at Sunny Hill. I was out of breath, but I was safe.

“Chase.”

It was Kristina. She was playing tether ball with Edgar, Josh, and Sophia. I waved at them, signaling for them to follow as I headed to the center courtyard. Our playground watch is a bunch of old ladies who see about as good as a ninety year old sheep dog. It makes it easy for a self appointed king like Sheldon to punish any one he chooses.

My friends followed me. I went to the teachers' lounge. If Sheldon found me, I would hammer for help.

Sophia crouched low. “Are we hiding from his majesty again?” The word majesty was dripping with sarcasm.

”Is there anyone else?” Kristina replied.

“I hide from all the sixth graders.” Josh kept looking over his shoulder. “I hope no one saw me. I'm a loyal subject.”

Edgar gave Josh a disapproving look. “It’s Mrs. Commanski’s fault. She never should have told Sheldon that his middle name meant king.

Six month ago Mrs. Commanski was teaching her class about ancient Rome. Roman rulers were called Caesar, which just so happened to be Sheldon’s middle name. The very next day, Sheldon declared himself king. He assigned himself a royal guard, which was really just a bunch of sixth graders who liked watching Sheldon pick on younger kids. Sheldon started making everyone pay taxes to his royal budget.

“I haven’t had a milk in six months.” said Kristina.

“Yeah, but Chase got him good.” Edgar looked at me as if I was a hero.

“What do you mean?” Josh was clueless.

Sophia started dancing around, “Three weeks ago Sheldon’s royal guard cornered Chase.”

The story was old, but they loved hearing it. “Sheldon’s Royal Guard tripped me. They held me to the ground while Sheldon went on and on about his mother grounding him. Seems she’s not too happy about the four F’s he got on his last report card. He kept asking me how I got such great grades. His eyes were bugging out and he kept screaming; spit was flying and my mind froze with fear. So I asked myself...”

Sophia interrupted, “We know. What would Abe do?”

“Abe always told the truth. But I knew that if I told Sheldon the truth, if I said I liked to read – well we all remember what happened to Charlie Skidmore.”

“Poor Charlie.”

“I told Sheldon that I ...”

Sophia couldn’t stop herself. “Chase told Sheldon that he took smartness pills.”

“Can you believe that, smartness pills?” Edgar started laughing now.

“Who would fall for that?” Josh seemed to forget that he was a loyal subject.

“I might, if it was Chase who said it. He does get straight A’s.” Kristina smiled at me.

I felt the warmth of embarrassing heat rush to my face. I changed the subject.

“He knows about the pellets.”

“What?” Edgar said.

“How?” asked Kristina.

“He just guessed.”

“You’re dead man.” Josh said, “I ain’t hanging with you today.

The bell rang. Kristina and Sophia turned and started moving toward class, but I stopped them.

“Wait. Stay here. We’ll escort Mrs. O’Mara to class. That way Sheldon can’t do anything.”

“You’re always thinking Chase?” Kristina’s eyes twinkled with romance.

“Of course,” said Edgar, “Sheldon may be king of torment, but Chase is emperor of intellect.”

Everyone laughed.

Mrs. Commanski step out of the teachers’ lounge. “What are you doing here? This is not your private patio. Couldn’t enjoy my coffee. Kept hearing your insidious laughter.” She shouted, “This is a school, not a comedy club.”

“It’s okay Karen. They keep me company on my walk to class.”

As we walked, I spied Sheldon and his royal guard hiding behind the play structure. Mrs. Dunn was the playground watch. She’s older than my great grandmother, and moves even slower. Sheldon pointed at me and then slid his finger across his neck.

Chapter 3

Fight! Fight! Fight!

We walked into class with Mrs. O'Mara. I did my best to forget about Sheldon. I refused to let that big oaf ruin my straight "A" record. After all, how can I become the President of the United States if I achieve anything less than an "A"? If I were president, I would be just like Abraham Lincoln. I would unite the world and make everyone be friends; no more bullying, no more wars, and plenty of food for everyone.

Mrs. O'Mara was teaching us all about biomes. That's a scientific word. It's a region's environment. A biome includes all the plant life, animal life and even the climate of that region.

First we studied a desert biome. Mrs. O'Mara had the entire class pretend that we were spiders and snakes, lizards and hawks, or scorpions and foxes. We all crawled, flew, or trotted around the room looking for food. As we hunted, Mrs. O'Mara taught us about the desert food chain. After deserts, we studied the African savanna biome. I was a lion, so everyone else in the class moved out of my way. It was very cool. For once in my life, I was the bully. It felt good; except I was a little lonely.

Everyone else was frolicking, leaping around the class and having fun. I was all alone. But, I liked feeling the power of the lion.

Kristina, Greg and Sarah were zebras. Ken, Catherine, Joe, and Sophia were wildebeests, and Toby, Josh, and Ryan were vultures. They kept flying around all the other animals waiting for me to attack. The entire class was huddled around a little make-believe water hole. Mrs. O'Mara called out, "Be alert. Do you smell that? It smells like a lion. Chase is hunting you."

The zebra and wildebeest began to move about the water hole nervously. "Excellent. That's exactly how they would react. Kristina, I like the way you're lifting your head and smelling the air."

I sprung toward the water hole, leaping over one of the desks. I picked Edgar because he had a sprained ankle. Everyone scattered. Edgar was a gazelle. He was as fast as one too, even with his sore ankle. It was a glorious feeling. All my life I had been the prey, now I was the predator. I screamed out like a lion.

I could almost taste the juicy gazelle meat.

The bell rang. It was time for recess. Everyone remained animalistic, rushing to the door as if they were a gazelle, zebra, or a wildebeest. It was very funny. We were knocking over desks, and bumping into the door.

Any other teacher would have been mad. But Mrs. O'Mara laughed. "Yes. Yes. That is how a herd would stampede."

As we ran through the lunch tables the wildebeest broke off to the left. I stayed on the gazelle. Edgar made for the open blacktop, so I kicked into my top speed. Edgar's ankle was slowing him down. I was about to pounce. If I could bring the gazelle down, it would be a lion's ultimate victory; lunch.

Sheldon came out of nowhere. He hit me like a renegade king. He wrapped his chubby arms around my head, twisting me. He rolled me over and over until we had done three complete flips across the blacktop. Sheldon was on top of me. His legs straddled my chest, and his arms held me pinned to the cold blacktop.

The entire school started shouting, "Fight! Fight! Fight!"

“How dare you defy your king? How dare you feed me pellets? I got a special treat for you.”

Sheldon leaned forward so that his head was just above mine. He pursed his lips together pulling out a sticky stream of spit. The drooling string poured from his mouth, hanging like a watery web. It sank down toward my mouth. I closed my lips. The last thing I wanted was to let that drool drop into my mouth.

Sheldon let the drool come to within an inch of my face. He sucked the stream of spit back into his mouth, and the crowd of students screamed wildly. Sheldon leaned back and looked into the sea of faces. He smiled, then leaned forward again. He pursed his lips a second time pulling out another spit string. He let the spit-web drop. The drool was so close I could almost feel the repulsive wet spilling onto me. But Sheldon must have loved the glory of the crowd, for he sucked this spit-web it up too. The crowd howled.

I knew the dreaded drop was coming this time. I tried to turn my head, but Sheldon tucked my arms under his knees and held my head still. I saw no sign of sympathy in Sheldon’s eyes. I was doomed. The third string of drool dropped toward my frozen mouth.

What happened next is still a blur in my mind. Something big and white soared in on Sheldon. It moved fast; so fast that it was nothing more than a blur of flapping feathers. Sheldon was ripped off of me. The stringy spit-web went flying and hit three cheering sixth graders. Sheldon was thrown under a nearby tree.

The big, white soaring thing flew up and over the principal’s building. It made an arcing turn. I saw white feathers rocketing toward me. I buried my head under my arms. The thing, whatever it was, grabbed me by the shoulders and suddenly I was in the air.

I was moving through the air now, like a low-flying plane. The crowd ducked. It sounded as if a car-sized hawk was pulling me up and into the air. I looked down at Sheldon. He scurried out from under the tree, doing a frantic crawl toward the play structure where he hid beneath the slide.

I felt myself rising higher and higher off the ground. The flapping sound was deafening. I was scared. I screamed out, “what’s happening?”

It was like talking into the spinning blades of a fan. My voice sounded all chopped up. My eyes blurred with fear. I didn't know it at the time, but I was about to meet Warwick Vladislav.

A slight pinching sensation pierced my shoulders, so I reached up. My fingers wrapped around a pair of rippled claws. The claws were bright orange with black tips. The tips dug into my sweatshirt, and I swung back and forth like a marionette.

My puppet master took me to the principal's building. I was set upon the roof. My knees went weak. I was scared, but I needed to see what had carried me up here. I spun around and saw the strangest creature.

This creature had long white feathers covering his entire body. He was as big as a bull, but instead of horns the bird-man had a high row of red feathers that ran across the top of his head forming a mohawk. Tiny white feathers covered his entire face, but he had a human nose and his mouth was a hard beak. His eyes were as black as a dark basement closet, shining out like beacons amid his gleaming-white feathers. Wings grew out from the center of his back, and a pair of human arms hung from his shoulders. This bird-man was enormous.

The giant bird-man towered over me; his white wings flapping in the warm breeze. He reached out his hand, and his bright beak opened. Half speaking like a human, and halfway screeching like a hawk, he said, "Chase, I need your help."

I was shocked. I stumbled backwards. Totally forgetting that I was on the roof of the principal's building; not remembering that I was dangerously close to the edge, I stepped right off and began to plummet toward the ground below.

Kristina, Josh, Edgar and Sophia all screamed for help, but they were too scared to move. The entire school was in a panic; except Mrs. Dunn. She kept walking the yard as if nothing unusual had happened.

The bird-man leaped forward, flapping his wings and reaching out with his clawed feet. He clenched the front of my sweatshirt. We rose up again and onto roof.

A smile came to the birds-man's beak. "Chase Althea, I've been looking all over the world for you. My name is Warwick Vladislav. I am a warrior bird from the planet Annathmaw." He reached out a second time. This time I let him shake my hand.

“We need your help. My planet is on the brink of an all out war. I am told that you are the only one who can save us. Will you come with me?”

Chapter 4

The Big Decision

I had always dreamt of seeing other worlds, but this was ridiculous. I wasn't going anywhere with this bird. For all I knew, he wanted to chomp me down; swallow me up as if I were a tiny mouse.

"You just want to eat me. I bet you think I'm a tasty meal. I can almost hear my bones crunching in that hard beak."

Warwick burst into screeching laughter. "I only eat fruit from the lovely trees on my planet. But lately they're a little sour. Now the saber-kangs, they might try to eat you. But, I would never let that happen."

I imagined these Kang things as gigantic drooling creatures who relished the thought of crunching down on my bones.

I suddenly felt all sweaty and nervous. My knees began to lose their strength and I started to wobble.

"Think – what would Abe do?" I answered myself. "He'd remain calm, and he'd stay here. He would never abandon his people."

I started to feel a little better.

The warrior bird tilted his head.

I took a deep breath, "I'm not going with you."

Warwick's red Mohawk seemed to lose some of its brilliance. The bird-man knelt down on one knee slowing the beat of his wings. His bird eyes seemed to cry out for help. "Selma Oswin is an oracle on my planet. She can see into the future. She has foreseen that you are the healer of our planet. You have the ability to look into people hearts.

Selma told me to remind you about your neighbor, the one with the blonde hair. You saved his life."

I was astonished. "How could you possibly know about that?"

Warwick was excited. He gave a shrill call. "I already told you, Selma Oswin is an oracle. She is incredible; beautiful, with brown feathers and eyes that... that... well, We're just friends. It's not like I want to marry her or anything like that."

I had no idea what Warwick was talking about. Who cared if he wanted to marry Selma? Warwick must have read the look on my face.

"You *do* know what an oracle is?"

I nodded, but Warwick explained anyway.

"An oracle like Selma can see glimpses of the future. She can not see every single event, and she doesn't know the exact outcome, but she has seen enough to know that you are our planet's only hope."

"In other words, Selma only knows that I *could* help. But, I could still be killed, couldn't I?"

Warwick looked worried. It was weird to see something so big and terrifying look worried. I thought back to the day I saved my neighbor.

"I'm sorry Warwick. Four dogs bit me that day. I got seven stitches! It really hurt."

"Yes, but you saved someone. Wasn't that worth a few stitches?"

"Are the creatures on your planet as big as you?"

"Some of them. But," He held up his hand, "I vow to protect you! I will give my life if necessary to make sure no harm befalls you!"

“Are those kang things as big as you?”

Warwick nodded.

I shook mine. “It’s too dangerous. I am sorry Warwick. I can’t do it.”

Warwick folded his wings. His massive arms were hidden beneath long, white feathers. His head dropped low and he looked down-right distraught. He was about to turn and take to the air; return home empty handed.

I thought about my neighbor, Jimmy. Perhaps Warwick was right. Perhaps I could see into peoples’ hearts.

I reached out and grabbed a handful of feathers, “Wait! I’ll go.”

I looked down at the crowd. By now, the teachers had come out from their lounge. Mrs. Commanski stared up in disbelief. She didn’t dare yell at Warwick.

Mrs. O’Mara said, “Hang on Chase! I’m coming.” She was climbing up the drainpipe. I looked down at Mrs. O’Mara. She was truly a dedicated teacher.

I said, “Lets go!”

Chapter 5

My First Space Flight

Warwick's fist wrapped about my sweatshirt and he tossed me atop his back. The warrior bird spread his wings and leapt from the building. We circled the crowd of students with Warwick squawking in his bird language, and then he headed into the blue sky. We rose higher and higher until the air began to get thin. I found it difficult to breathe.

"Put your head under my feathers. They will hold a pocket of your Earth's air and you'll be able to breathe. I dipped my head beneath his fluffy white down and watched through his feathers as we left my planet and entered the darkness of space.

I have no idea how he did it. Perhaps Warwick Vladislay knows the secret of bending time, but somehow we traveled light-years in about forty-five minutes. Warwick ricocheted off of the planets. As we flew through the emptiness of space Warwick would speed toward a planet, almost as if that were his home planet of Annathmaw, but then we would ricochet off that planet's atmosphere and warp in the depths of space. Each time we ricocheted, Warwick would bend time, and we would jump to an entirely new galaxy. The whole experience was a little nauseating. Finally, Warwick entered the atmosphere

of his home planet. Annathmaw was much smaller than earth. As we raced across the landscape, I saw areas of vast forestland, rocky cliffs, and a dry desert.

The sky above was dark with thousands of green stars. The stars were the size of our moon when it is full. They seemed dull, almost as if they wanted nothing to do with this forlorn planet.

Warwick seemed to sense what I was thinking. “The stars used to shine bright green. They made the land grow wild with beautiful colored plants. But when the war started, the stars lost their glow.”

I didn’t know what to say. The entire planet looked dead.

“I want to show you the one plant that still grows healthy. It is called the Poem Tree.”

We landed on the top branch of the only tree for miles. Below us was a lifeless sea of sand that spread out as far as the eye could see. But this tree stood tall, over fifty feet high; with a rainbow of colored leaves, each one more brilliant than the last. The tree’s thick branch bent low under Warwick’s weight.

Warwick sighed, “It’s always nighttime now. I think the stars have forsaken us.” The warrior bird looked up at the green orbs. It seemed to me that he wanted to ask them why. Why had they forsaken his planet? His eyes turned stone-like, and he looked back to me. “Time to go. Selma is expecting us.”

Once again I gazed down at the brilliantly colored tree. It seemed as if the tree itself were calling to me, asking me to pluck a leaf from one of its branches. I reached forward and picked a yellow leaf that was the color of our sun. Warwick motioned for me to rip the leaf. I was not quite sure what to expect, so I tore slowly.

The leaf hissed quietly, and then a tiny voice recited this poem.

“Fear wears red scales of destruction.

The dragon is fear.

She goes through life blaming others.

Fear is a warrior - destroying all she touches.

Her companions are hate, and despair.

Fear goes by the name of ObisPo

*Fear wears the soft skin of sympathy.
The earth boy is fear
He goes through life helping others.
Fear is a healer - repairing all he can.
His companions are empathy, and understanding.
Fear goes by the name of Althea.*

*Hope is a healer
Hope is the green stars of Annathmaw.
Hope calls for ObisPo.
Hope calls for Althea.
Stars ignite
Chase Althea must take flight.”*

Warwick twisted his head in his bird-like manner. “Always remember the poem of this tree. There will come a time when its meaning is clear.”

“Do you know what it means?”

“I am familiar with some of it; the green stars, and you of course. But, its meaning is not for me to unravel. That is up to you.”

Chapter 6

Saucer-beasts

We were flying again. Below was a vast ocean of sand with dunes that seemed to move like waves, and a light wind that felt like a warm sea breeze. The rolling landscape made my stomach lurch with empty pains of hunger.

“Is there anything to eat around here?”

Warwick smiled. “Err, there’s plenty of food. I hope you like dry and pasty fruit.”

We flew to a lonely shrub growing out of the sand. It was a leafless plant with knotted branches and exactly one piece of fruit at the end of each twig. Warwick bent over the tiny bush; his wings were high as he reached out and plucked one of the brown fruits. He handed one to me and popped the other in his mouth. I did the same, and our faces immediately mirrored one another; a look of dinnertime disgust.

The fruit tasted like sour spinach. It stuck to the roofs of my mouth, making it difficult to talk. “This is one dead desert.”

Warwick looked out at the bare sand. “Deserts can be beautiful. I brought Selma here once. We had a picnic under a butternut tree over there.” He pointed into a sandy hill. “The tree died a long time ago.” Warwick said nothing for a long moment. He let out a loud screech of sorrow. His birdcall echoed off the lifeless sand, reverberating through the dry air like a siren calling for help.

Three dark figures flew into view. They looked like round flying saucers zipping back and forth across the sky.

“Rats! I’ve done it now. It’s the Desert Riders. They must have heard me.”

“The what?”

“Desert Riders. They’re fierce fighters. Looks like I am going to have to prove my vow.”

“Vow?”

“Remember, I vowed to protect you with my very life.”

I watched as the three dark shapes zipped back and forth drawing closer and closer. They moved with incredible speed; skipping across the sky like a flat stone across water. Someone was sitting on the top of the front saucer-beast.

One of the saucers-beasts spun in and struck Warwick. It hit him square in his chest. The saucer-beast and Warwick went tumbling over a small dune.

I looked back, wondering where the others had gone. That’s when I saw it. I was standing face to face with a beast that was every bit as big as Warwick. A soft underbelly faced me, while a pair of bat-like wings flapped behind its hard tortoise shell. It had the face of a snapper turtle with a beak that would easily break my arm.

The sound of punches echoed from behind me. I heard a loud “Oooaff”, and then the sound of Warwick’s wings. He soared past me like an eagle. His arms reached for the saucer-beast. But, the turtle-head dipped down and into its shell. Warwick missed.

The first saucer-beast came from behind the sand dune. It flew after Warwick, hitting him in the back. Once again bird and beast went tumbling across the desert.

I looked at the headless saucer-beast. Its head popped up and dark eyes stared at me. He lunged forward, gripping me within his clammy claws. He held me tight and jumped into the air.

As we soared higher and higher, I watched Warwick battle the beast below. He punched again and again, first with his right fist and then with his left, but the beast kept turning its hard shell into Warwick's fists. Finally, Warwick grabbed the top of its shell and tossed him aside.

That's when the third saucer-beast struck. It was the biggest of all. Atop its hard shell was a rider, a girl. She was steering it, driving its snapper head deep into Warwick's chest.

Warwick flew backward. He hit hard. Sand flew into the air. But Warwick was a Warrior Bird. He ricocheted off the ground and took to the air. He was rocketing toward me.

The beast zipped back and forth across the sky. My legs swung this way and that. I was sure he would drop me. But, somehow its clawed feet held tight.

Warwick flew so fast that I lost sight of him. An instant later, he was directly in front of us. He spun around in mid-air, beating his wings backwards and stopping. Eagle-talon feet reached for the saucer-beast's head. But, once again, the head disappeared.

I heard a high pitched battle cry. It was the girl. She was riding her saucer-beast. There was a tremendous crash. Saucer-beast and warrior bird went tumbling across the sky. Amazingly, the girl was able to hold tight. Warwick twisted. He reached out. His iron grip locked onto the beast's shell. His other hand reached for the girl. He grabbed a handful of hair and ripped the two apart. The beast was thrown like a Frisbee. It went flying through the air, spinning round and round.

Warwick held the girl by her hair. Her face was the same color as the green stars above. She had dark black hair and crystal blue eyes that burned into mine with furious anger.

"Let me go, you insolent bird!"

Warwick ignored her. He yelled to the saucer-beast. "Shall we trade?"

"Never," screamed the girl.

The saucer-beast almost dropped me. We were a thousand feet above the ground. He tossed me from his front paws to his back. One claw missed. I dangled from one arm. The beast shot out after Warwick.

Warwick took off. We were right on his tail-feathers. Warwick arched his head. He beat his wings hard, flying up and around the saucer-beast. The girl looked horrified. Warwick did a backward flip around us. His eagle-beak was aimed perfectly. He missed me and struck the beast in his soft belly.

The saucer-beast dropped me. His forepaws, feet, and even his wings wrapped tightly about his stomach. We both fell like rocks.

I watched the ground moved closer and closer. It was like pushing the zoom button on my camera. I was sure that I would crash into one of those twisted, knotty bushes with the awful tasting fruit.

Warwick sailed into my rescue. He grabbed me, and now I was right next to the green girl.

The saucer-beast was falling toward a certain death. I screamed to Warwick, "Save that saucer-thing!"

Chapter 7

The Beautiful Ryvas

Warwick flew fast, rocketing after the beast. I looked over at the girl. Her blue eyes glared back at me. The saucer-beast was plummeting toward a certain death. Hot wind rushed past us as Warwick reached out for the beast. We were close now, only fifty feet from the ground.

The girl screamed, “Fergus!”

“Grab him Warwick.” I pleaded the obvious.

Warwick’s eagle-talons clamped about the beast’s shell and he quickly pulled back, flapping his wings hard.

We came to a hovering pause just above the desert floor. Warwick laid the saucer-beast on its side and landed next to him. He set me down, but held tight to the girl. The other two saucer-beasts flew in. They landed in front of us.

Warwick’s voice screeched with an eagle’s fury, “Ryvas, you should know better. Really - only three bats? Next time you better bring twenty.”

The big bat stepped forward. His tortoise face contorted into a menacing snarl. He was about to throw-down, but Ryvas held up her hand and he was silent.

The girl was no older than I am, but she spoke in a curt voice that made her sound as old as my mother.

“Warwick Vladislav, how dare you? How dare you enter my territory? My laws are quite clear. My lands are off limits to any and all tribes. Trespassers - will - be - killed!”

I was shocked. I asked myself, “What would Abe do?” I knew immediately. He would never allow the unfair treatment of another being; be that man or beast. I stepped forward.

“Are you serious? Do you really think that you have the right...”

“Who is this peasant? Bow and say nothing. I will tell you when to speak.”

Who did this girl think she was, Sheldon Slack?

The biggest saucer-beast stepped forward. He bent down on one knee, and bowed his head. His voice rumbled deep and gravelly, “My queen, I am still able to fight. Do you want me to destroy the bird? I will kill the boy if you like.”

Warwick moved faster than the eye could follow. He let go of Ryvas, leaping over her and lunging toward the saucer-beast. He grabbed the beast by the throat. Warwick flipped the tortoise onto its back and laughed.

“It will be a very cold day in this desert before you destroy me. Chase Althea is my charge. No one will harm him!”

The saucer-beast kicked his legs. He flapped his wings, but all he accomplished was to shoot sand into Ryvas’s face.

“Enough! BaShell, still your legs!”

The saucer-beast froze at her command. Ryvas continued, “Eitan, flip him upright. Fergus - stop your wailing. You sound like a baby!”

I looked over at the saucer-beast named Fergus. He was still on his side. His four turtle legs hugged his belly, and his wings were draped about his tortoise shell. He stopped wailing, but every now and then he would let loose a little moan. I walked over and looked at his stomach. It was all black and blue. I reached out and rubbed it, saying, “Hang in there big guy.”

Fergus looked angry. “Why are *you* helping me?”

“I feel sorry for you. Boy, that must really hurt.”

The beast started to laugh, “You’re telling me it hurts! Let me tell you...Wow, IT HURTS!” He continued to laugh, “Oh it hurts worse when I laugh.” More laughter. “Ah, I can’t help it.” Another small burst of laughter escaped his lips. “I can’t stop.”

“Try not to laugh!” I suggested, but it was no use. The laughter was contagious. I started laughing. Fergus and I were both laughing hard. Tears of laughter rolled down our cheeks.

Ryvas marched over with her two sauce-beasts in tow. “Fergus! For cry’n out loud, what’s gotten into you?”

Fergus stopped laughing, “I don’t know.” He shot me a look. Both our eyes watered with glee. We burst into laughter.

“Stop it! Stop Fergus. I command you!”

Fergus covered his mouth, but the laughter squeezed between his forepaws.

BaShell stepped forward. He kicked Fergus. “You heard your queen. Stop laughing!”

I realized that Eitan was a female saucer-beast. She had a lighter face, and smaller wings. She stepped up to Fergus. “In case you didn’t notice, we just got our tails whooped by this soft-feathered bird!”

Eitan helped Fergus to his feet. He did a quick bow, but winced at the pain. “I am sorry my Queen. The harder I try to stop laughing, the more I laugh.”

Eitan started to giggle, “That is the biggest” ...giggle, giggle, giggle... “the most blackest, and bluest bruise that I have ever seen. Boy, I bet that hurts.” Eitan broke into laughter.

“Oh no, not you too.” Ryvas looked disgusted.

A small snicker escaped Warwick’s beaked mouth. He had a screeching laugh, “A soft-feathered bird. Now that is funny. I have never been called a soft-feathered bird before. Screeeee-ha haa, screeeee-ha haa”

Ryvas smiled. Her dimples seemed to dance with delight at the prospect of laughter. “Soft-feathered bird. I bet Fergus would argue point. Your beak is anything but soft!” Ryvas burst into laughter.

BaShell's booming voice sounded confused. "Are you alright my queen?" Ryvas was laughing hard now. It was as if years of strict obedience and harsh laws of diplomatic diplomacy melted away and she was a kid again.

A bark of laughter escaped BaShell's mouth. He looked a little surprised, but happy. He walked over to Warwick and put his arm around him as if he was an age-old friend.

After some time, the laughter died down. Ryvas came to me. "I have never laughed so hard in all my life. What is your name?"

I was speechless. I looked upon her green face and into her crystal blue eyes. It was like standing before a movie star. I never wanted a girl-friend. That was gross. But Ryvas was different. I felt a romantic rush. I was thrilled, but I was also embarrassed.

Warwick saved me. "This is Chase Althea. He is from the planet Earth. Selma Oswin has prophesized that he will save our planet."

Ryvas smiled at me. "Well Chase Althea, there is something special about you. Perhaps you *can* save our planet." Her royal diplomacy returned. "You have my allegiance. Where to next Mr. Vladislav?"

"I must take Chase to Selma. But first, I need rest. I haven't slept for days."

BaShell waddled up to me. He bent over and shook my hand. "I am pleased to meet you, Chase Althea. You are a funny Earth-boy. Are all Earth-boys as funny as you?"

Before I could answer Eitan stepped forward bumping BaShell out of the way. She gripped my hand in hers and said, "What about Earth-girls? Are they funny like you? I think I would like one for a pet."

I almost started to laugh, but Fergus interrupted, "Chase is my friend. I met him first." He smiled and I started to laugh.

Ryvas called to us. There was a soft patch of sand just ahead. We all laid down in the middle of the desert. The sand was soft and warm. It seemed to hug me like a blanket, and in no time at all, our entire troop was fast asleep.

Chapter 8

Quicksand

We had slept only a short time when I heard the strangest gurgling sound. It sounded as though one of the saucer-beasts had just finished brushing his teeth and was now gargling with sand. I fought the sleepiness, struggling to open my eyes. I was horrified.

Eitan was totally asleep and floating in a sea of sand. Her tortoise shell had half sunken into the warm, sandy tomb. Her neck was stretched to its full extent. Waves of sand were being sucked in and out of her mouth. Each time she breathed the sand gurgled in her throat.

Fergus and Ryvas were lying next to me. The three of us were just beginning to sink. BaShell awoke to find he was sinking. He looked like a giant boulder struggling to stay afloat; his wings beat hard but the sand held him.

I looked for Warwick, but he was nowhere to be seen. I searched the surface of the sand. My mind whirled with the possibilities. He could have escaped. He could have beaten his powerful wings and pulled himself free. Yet even as the thought entered my mind, I knew it was not possible. Warwick would never leave us to drown.

Warwick must have fallen asleep and drowned before he even realized that he was in quicksand. I felt myself beginning to panic. What would Abe do? I don't think Abe ever had to deal with quicksand.

Someone shouted from atop a nearby sand dune. "Hold on there! I knew that birdbrain would blow it!"

He had the strangest voice. It sounded like a chalkboard was stuck in his throat, and when he spoke nails shrieked across it. His voice tickled my ears. I spun around and saw a spider the size of a Volkswagen. He had short black hair with thick gray lines running from the tip of his head to the point of his spinner. His eight legs clicked away at the sand spitting up a small dust cloud.

"I knew that yolk-brain would blow it! Hang tight! I'll have you out of there in a heartbeat!"

A thick rope of webbing flew from the spider with a high-pitched whistling sound. The webbing soared past me and splattered against BaShell's hard shell. The spider started pulling BaShell. He spit out another line and caught Eitan. I knew that I was next.

Abe would never let a friend die. I knew what I had to do. I dove down into the sand. I swam down pulling myself deeper and deeper into the sandy tomb. The watery sand was dark, so dark that I couldn't even see my own hand. The tiny grains of sand washed up against my skin, touching me with their death grip. I reached and searched for Warwick, but he was nowhere to be found. He was lost. He had to be down here, but where? I began to run out of air and swam frantically now, searching for Warwick. My mind screamed out. *"I need air! I need air! Swim for the surface!"* I lost all rational thought. I turned back towards the surface and tried to swim up. But the heavy sands pushed harder, forcing me down. Blackness stretched out before me. My mind screamed again. *"Chase, breathe in! Breathe in! Breathe anything, just breathe!"*

I took a deep breath, hoping for just a little air. All I got was a mouthful of sand. My arms thrashed about in anger. *Wait! What was that? Warwick! Could it be? It was!"*

I had done the impossible. I had found Warwick Vladislav. But now I had the problem of getting us out of the quicksand.

Warwick did not move. I held tightly to him. I wanted so badly to swim to the surface, to pull Warwick up with me. But I was tired, so very tired. My lungs stopped fighting for air, and I felt very sleepy. Shadows began to dance all about me, and I began to dream.

Chapter 9

The Valiant Spector

It was a wonderful dream. I dreamed that the giant spider crawled down on a thick web. He wrapped two of his legs around Warwick and me, while his other six pulled at the line of webbing, hauling us to the surface.

Then, with a cough and a spitting spray of sand, I awoke. The spider's heroism was real.

Ryvas and BaShell were doing CPR on Warwick. BaShell pushed on his chest ten times. Ryvas blew into his mouth. BaShell went at it again, and then Ryvas. Back and forth they went, each taking their turn in an attempt to revive him. It seemed Warwick could not be saved. Perhaps he had been under the sand for too long.

Just when I had lost hope, Warwick coughed a mouthful of sand into Ryvas's face. He was dazed. At first he thought he was still a fledgling. "Five more minutes mom. Just let me sleep a little longer."

Then he said, "Wait... Where... What happened?"

The spider's chalkboard voice tickled my ears. "You let the Earth-boy fall asleep in a pool of quicksand you birdbrain!"

Warwick was up on his feet. I thought he was going to hit the spider square in the face. He shouted, "Watch it, Spector! I've had it to here," Warwick held his hand to his chin, "with your insults." Warwick pulled his wings back. His fist was cocked and ready to spring.

"Warwick, you're a yolk-brain! Your feathers were overcooked, but you're birdbrain was undercooked. It's still a little yolkey." Spector bounced up and down. "You won't escape my web this time, birdbrain!"

Warwick moved with his unbelievable speed. He flipped Spector over. The giant spider shot a thick web, but missed. Warwick grabbed the web and spun it around Spector's own legs.

"Let me go!"

"Who's the yolk-brain now?" Warwick danced around the spider flapping his wings and screeching like an eagle.

I had to do something. I was here to save this planet. Both Warwick and Spector were powerful warriors. They weren't friends, but they weren't enemies.

"STOP IT WARWICK!" Warwick stopped in mid-dance and looked at me with a puzzled face. "Untie him! Both of you - cool it!"

Warwick bent over and with one quick snap of his beak the web split in two. Spector scurried to his feet. His legs moved like drumsticks on a barrel.

"You're a brave spider, Spector. I want to thank you for saving both my life and Warwick's."

I turned to Warwick, "That's right Warwick, both of us were at the bottom of that quicksand. Spector came down on one of his webs. We owe him our lives."

Warwick's head dropped to his chin. He walked over to Spector and held out his hand. "I'm sorry, Spector. We've been fighting as long as I can remember. Chase is right. You are very brave." He took a deep breath, "I always put you down. I want to be Selma's number one protector. Do you forgive me?"

Spector's voice squeaked. "I don't think you need to worry about Selma. She is *soooo* in love with you. Haven't you figured that out yet?"

"Really? I mean... We're just friends. I don't want to marry her or anything."

“Reeeally.” Spector rolled his eight eyes. “When are you two going to admit it? You are both lost in visions of love. It’s *sooo* sickening!”

Warwick changed the subject. “Spector... If I am injured, you must become Chase Althea’s protector. Would you do that for me?”

Spector wrapped one of his legs about Warwick, “Right now, I shall be your protector. When this is all over, you can give your sweetheart a big kiss.”

“We’re just friends. I don’t want to kiss her.” Warwick’s face was as red as his Mohawk feathers.

I looked past Warwick at the desert sand and then up at the green stars. Earth was far beyond my sight. I missed my mom and dad, and wondered if Abe was ever away from his parents.

We ate some dry, tasteless fruit then set out on our quest. Spector would return to Selma’s home. Warwick and I would meet him later. First, we were going with Ryvas. I didn’t want to admit it, but I was happy to travel with the green queen. Her blue eyes made my heart thump.

Chapter 10

The Mesa Cave

Warwick and I flew with Ryvas and her saucer-beasts. In the center of the desert was a high escarpment. It rose a thousand feet above the sandy dunes. The top was a flat mesa. It had row after row of the twisted and knotty shrubs.

The entire tribe was busy cultivating their crops. Saucer-beasts carried green riders up to the top of the mesa, and back down again. Atop the mesa the gardeners worked meticulously. They watered and trimmed the knotty shrubs, picking the tasteless fruit as they worked.

Below, the beasts labored at the watering pumps, while the riders held buckets. There were fifty or sixty of these old fashion pumps, each with a long metal handle and a fat faucet. Once a bucket was filled, rider and beasts would carry the water up to the mesa.

After a quick wave to the gardeners, riders returned to their beasts, then flew down to the pumps. It was like watching the rhythmic dance of bees in a hive.

Hundreds of caves were carved into the rock of the mesa. This was where the Desert Riders lived. Each cave had a private porch. A railing of precious stone encircled each porch so that the entire mesa glimmered in the desert sky.

BaShell bellowed, “Your queen approaches.”

The entire tribe bowed down on one knee. They waited until we landed. Then they all scurried into the air.

Ryvas stood upon her palace porch. It was made of a green rock that looked like water under our feet. The railing was blue topaz. Warwick stood to the right of Ryvas. I was on her left. BaShell, Fergus, and Eitan stood at attention directly behind us.

In a matter of moments, the entire tribe was hovering before us. Each saucer-beast carried two gardeners, and a rider. Some of Ryvas's people were young and others were quite old.

Ryvas began to speak. She had that movie-star aura, and I found myself thinking romantic thoughts. I shook my head. What was happening to me?

“Loyal Subjects. I come to you with hope; the hope of peace. It was long before my father - even before his father - but this land was once a paradise. It was a land where all the tribes were friends, where the fruits flourished, and all tribes lived in harmony. I believed that those days were gone forever. But, now we have hope. He comes from a far away planet.”

Except for the beating of the saucer-beasts' wings the crowd was silent.

“His name is Chase Althea. We are about to embark on a pilgrimage – a pilgrimage to the Great Ocean.”

A murmur of worried whispers rose from the crowd.

“I know. The Saber-Kangs are always hungry for blood. But, this is a journey we must take. It will be a journey of healing, a journey that will bring back our suns. We will have delicious fruit once again.”

The crowd cheered.

“Tonight we feast!” Ryvas smiled at me. Her crystal blue eyes beckoned and romance entered my mind. My face turned hot, and I wondered if Abe was ever this charmed.

“Chase, you must join in our celebration.”

I was afraid Warwick would say no, so I spoke quickly. “We would be honored.”

“Chase, we are on a tight schedule.”

“It would be rude not to. This is how we will heal your planet; one tribe at a time.”

I followed Ryvas into her palace. The furniture was carved from milky-white opals. I thought it would be hard, but it was quite comfortable. Chandeliers shone from above. They were dome-shaped geodes turned upside down with a candle hanging in the center. Each gave a brilliant spectacle of light.

Once dinner was ready, we headed deeper into the cave. It opened to a mammoth cavern. There were thousands of chandeliers hanging from stalactite hundreds of feet above the floor. Long tables were carved into the rock, each with its own marble bench. The entire tribe was assembled. They all stood and bowed their heads as we entered the room. Once Ryvas took her seat, the desert people relaxed. The saucer-beasts used the benches like a pillow. They rested their chests upon the bench so that their heads were at the same height as the desert people's.

The food was made from the same dry and tasteless fruit we had had in the desert. But, the royal cooks were exceptional and the food tasted great. After dinner we took a long nap. I must have slept about six hours before Warwick woke me and said it was time to go. Everyone was asleep. I think Warwick wanted it that way.

Half an hour later, we were flying over a forest of dead trees. Warwick swooped down, skirting between the thorny branches, and we landed on the soft, earthy ground. The trees were thick and dark with rough bark and high reaching branches. The top branches blocked out the light of the green stars.

“How much fur...?”

A high-pitched snarl echoed from tree to tree. Warwick pulled me in. He wrapped his wings about me, and searched for movement in the forest.

Chapter 11

Issaquah and the Squachats

It sounded like the inside a hornet's nest. The snarls came from all around us. A torch sparked to life, and a skinny giant stepped from behind a tree. He was twice as tall as Warwick. His skin was like tree bark, and his eyes were large circular orbs.

“Ignite.”

The forest burst to life. Hundreds of torches flickered with flames. The tribe of giants stepped closer. I saw giant men and women; there were even giant children.

“Issaquah! Hold your squachats! Selma sent me. I have the earth-boy.”

I saw them. There were thousands of squachats. They were only two feet tall. But, they had deadly sharp teeth and long lethal claws. Leathery skin covered their bodies. They had pointed ears, and bulging eyes. The squachats stood on the shoulders of the giants, on the branches of the trees, and even on the forest floor. Their lips pulled back in a vicious snarl. Issaquah gave two sharp whistles. The squachats leaped into a frenzied attack. They jumped from their perches.

Warwick closed his wings about me. The squachats hit him again and again, their claws scratching, their teeth biting.

Warwick struck back. He swung his fist, knocking three out with one blow. His eagle talon grabbed two more, but the treacherous creatures kept coming.

I thought Warwick was going to fall. He stumbled back. The squachats swarmed. Warwick held me tight. His eagle talons dug into the earth. His wings moved,

flapping hard, pulling great sections of air and pushing it into the squachats. The tiny creatures flew back. They bounced off trees. They tumbled across the forest floor. They slammed into the giants.

Warwick screeched, "I don't want to fight."

A number of the squachats circled us. They got behind Warwick. One jumped onto his wing, but he just flew into the air. Another jumped, then another and another. Warwick's wings began to slow. His hurricane-force died. More squachats attacked.

I panicked. What would Abe do?

I jumped up. "STOP!"

Issaquah whistled. The entire forest froze. He held his finger in the air and made a circular movement. The squachats scurried back to their perches.

Issaquah stared at me.

A squachat called from a tree branch. "He's an idiot. He doesn't know what to say."

Another one echoed, "Earthlings are stupid."

The squachat on Issaquah's shoulder laughed. His eyes narrowed and he asked, "Are you stupid? My master is waiting. You have no words!"

The fierce creature looked to his master. "He is an idiot! How can this earth-thing save our planet?"

His eyes burned into mine. "You are ugly! Your earth-hide is pathetic." He held up his claw. A piece of my skin was hanging from its tip.

I looked at my arm. There was a thin stretch of missing skin. Blood trickled down my arm.

Warwick started to move but I stopped him. He screeched in fury. "You will pay for that Squachat!" The dead branches shook.

The squachat squealed with glee, "You'll face my claws little birdie." He made a slashing motion towards Warwick.

I suddenly knew what Abe would say. I smiled and bowed to the giants. "Issaquah, my earth is not very different from Annathmaw. Since the beginning of time

the people of earth have battled. We've fought one war after another. Many people have died. How do you think these wars started?"

Issaquah just stared. The squachats kept snarling.

"Differences..." I paused to let the word sink in. The people of earth are all unique. We all look a little different. We all have different opinions.

Do you know how these differences explode into war?"

Once again, Issaquah just stared.

"Judgments..." The squachats went quiet. "People started making judgments. They called one another names. People believed they were superior."

The tiny squachat blurted out, "What if we truly are superior?"

"Issaquah, do you have children?"

He nodded proudly. His hand gestured toward some of the younger giants.

"Many."

"Do they ever fight?"

"All Children fight."

"Have you ever told them to fight?"

Issaquah's eyes narrowed. "Never."

"Have your children cried because someone hurt them?"

He grit his teeth. "Yes."

I picked up a long branch. "How does it feel..." I pointed the tip at his chest, "here?"

The giant sighed, "My heart hurts when I see my children in pain."

"I think God's heart hurts too. We are all different, but we are all God's children. He loves us all.

Issaquah rubbed his chest. "It hurts god when his children fight."

"I think so."

The giant bent down on one knee. There was a tear in his eye. He said, "I thought Selma was crazy. She has been talking about the earthling for years." He put his hand on my face. It felt rough, but tender too. Issaquah's words rumbled with feeling.

"I was wrong."

He stood and faced his people.

“The prophesy is true. Chase Althea will save our planet.”

Chapter 12

Selma Oswin

Warwick and I walked in the center of our new giant friends. Trees formed a thick ceiling of dark limbs making it impossible to see without torches. I learned that the name-calling squachat was Surik. He felt bad about the way he had berated me and kept apologizing.

“You’re not bad to look at... ahh, for a human.”

Another squachat chimed in, “You’ve never seen a human.”

“Neither have you.” He pushed the other squachat back and whispered, “I’m just trying to be nice. How can you compare the beauty of our master’s skin to that soft flesh?”

“Be quiet or he’ll hear us.”

The giants stopped before a massive tree. Its roots reached out like colossal fingers digging in and holding firmly to the ground. It was much wider, far taller than any other tree in the forest.

Warwick smiled. “Climb aboard.”

I jumped upon his back. Warwick folded his wings and looked back. His eagle beak pulled into a grin. “Selma will be happy to see you.”

His dark eyes twinkled and I knew he was the happy one. He turned to Issaquah and said, “Wait here. We’ll be back.”

The giant nodded. He sat down, leaning against a tree and almost disappeared. His skin blended perfectly to the tree bark behind him. The rest of his tribe followed suit. If I didn’t know better I would have sworn that this was an empty forest.

Warwick started climbing. I clung to his feathery back while he worked his way up the tree. He reached one hand over the other. His clawed feet dug into the knotty bark. It would have been impossible for Warwick to fly up here, the limbs were a tangle.

He climbed higher and higher, pulling us deeper and deeper into the canopy of dark branches. I looked down. A thick carpet of tree branches lay below us. Somewhere far below the giants waited.

“Sounds like that bird-brained boyfriend of yours has finally made it.”

“I’m not her boyfriend!”

I looked up. A perfectly round hole was carved in the center of the tree. It looked like a gigantic owl nest. I wondered if Warwick had helped Selma fashion this tree cave. A pair of long spider legs appeared over the edge of the nest. Spector’s eight eyes glared down at me.

“You made it Chase.”

“Of course he made it. I am a warrior bird.”

“You didn’t stop and rest in quicksand this time did you?”

Warwick laughed. “Nope. Not this time.”

Spector’s spider-laugh was delightful. “Hurry up, Selma’s been pacing for hours. She says time is running out.”

The inside of Selma’s nest was immense. Spector’s webs blanketed the high ceiling, but the lower portion of the nest was spotless. Shelves were carved into the walls with slow burning candles that dripped wax. Thousands of books shared these shelves and the soft, flickering light made the whole nest feel warm and safe.

Selma was an owl-lady. Tiny white feathers covered her human face. She blinked. Big round eyes peered down at me. Her body was covered in long, flowing feathers of white, each with a touch of brown forming a triangular tip and creating a puffy plume. Her owl talons clicked against the wooden floor as she waddled over to Warwick. She gripped his hands and her wings fluttered slightly.

She had a voice like syrup, flowing out in an anxious melody. “I was worried about you.”

Warwick’s face turned red as his feathery Mohawk. “What could happen? I’m a warrior-bird. We can handle anything.”

“I’m not so sure, Warwick. Something waits for us. It hides in the murky depths of the Great Ocean.”

Selma came to me. “Chase Althea.” She settled down as if she were sitting on an egg. “I’m glad you came. You are the healer.”

Annathmaw was a paradise. It was a land of happiness and abundance. The green stars were bright. Plants grew juicy fruits. Life was wonderful.

War came and the stars grew dim. We are connected - the stars, Annathmaw, all living things. If the stars die, everything dies.”

She reached out to me. Her hand was soft on my cheek. “I have foreseen your healing. You can defeat the hatred. But, it won’t be easy. The ocean hides a beast that will try to destroy you.”

She twisted her owl head so that she was looking at Warwick. “We must leave at once.”

“Nothing will hurt Chase! He is my best friend.” Warwick looked at the giant spider. “You too Spector; I have two best friends!”

Selma’s eyes glossed. “The healing has begun.”

Spector said, “I got Chase.”

Warwick nodded and launched himself out of the nest. Selma followed, saying, “See ya below.”

Spector wrapped two legs about me. A line of webbing shot out of his thorax and we went face first down the side of the tree. By the time we reached the ground, Selma and Warwick were already talking with the giants.

Issaquah was in the middle of saying, "... ready to move. Follow us." He smiled at me, turned, and started walking. His tribe of giants followed with the squachats jumping from their shoulders to the trees and back again.

Warwick said, "Looks like they're in a bit of a hurry."

"Ya think? They didn't even say hello. Maybe they don't like spiders."

"How could they resist an eight-eyed fellow like you?"

"Beats me. You know my mother tried to eat me."

"Now that's just rude."

"I'll say."

"Do you want me to take Chase?"

"I'll take him. You can hold hands with your girlfriend."

"We're just friends."

"Sure you are." Spector laughed. He reached out with one of his legs and tossed me onto his back. "I'll take Chase."

Issaquah and his forest people were making there way through the trees. Their fiery torches beckoned for us to hurry. Selma and Warwick flew side by side through the thick forest. I sat atop Spector, his legs moving in a flurry to keep pace with the giant's steps.

Chapter 13

The Sabers

We broke through the forest and onto a vast desert. I looked for Ryvas and her Desert Riders, but saw only sand and knotty shrubs. We trekked for some time with Spector scurrying up one dune, and down the next; his long, pitchfork-legs kicking sand into my face.

Finally, we crested a ridge and there it was, the Great Ocean. Its water was a churning movement of blue-green waves with foamy white crests at the tips. The waves crashed into the sandy shore.

Surik bounded back. “The Ocean Warriors are north. Time to work a miracle, earth-boy.”

Issaquah’s voice boomed. “Looks like trouble.”

Spector rushed to the giant’s side. Issaquah lifted me onto his shoulder. Ryvas was flying in from the east. She was atop BaShell. Her entire tribe of Desert Riders flew in tight formation. BaShell soared over the sandy bluff and into the warrior’s city. Ryvas and her saucer-beasts circled.

The Ocean Warriors lived in pyramid houses. Each was built of limestone blocks. The homes ran along the coast for as far as the eye could see. In the center was a royal pyramid. The pyramid-castle had a pearl balcony and golden bricks at its point. There was a scurry of movement.

Ocean Warriors poured from their homes. Terrifying beasts flew from caves in the sandy bluffs that stood like sentries behind the pyramid homes. The beasts landed; each meeting an Ocean Warrior and together rocketing into the air. Battle cries echoed across the beach.

Issaquah screamed, "hurry!"

We were close now. I saw one of the warrior's beasts. No wonder they called it a saber.

The beast had long hind legs and short forepaws. It stood upright with orange and black striped fur covering its entire body. Leathery wings lifted the saber into the air. The beast's head was terrifying. It had a tiger-head with elongated fangs of a saber-toothed-cat.

I caught a glimpse of one of the Ocean Warriors. He looked like a Viking with long flowing hair and a blond beard to match. He held a clump of fur at the base of the saber's neck in one hand and a club in the other.

Warwick raced to my side. He screeched, "Ryvas! She needs our help."

I jumped onto his back.

BaShell was flying over the pyramid-castle. A warrior and his saber chased. BaShell spun around. They were face to face. The saber's front claws slashed at BaShell. The saucer-beast sucked his head under his shell. The saber missed. BaShell's snapper head shot out. He bit down on the saber's shoulder.

"Roaaaar." The saber struggled to free itself.

This Ocean Warrior wore a golden tunic. He was a mountain of a man, swinging a spiked club. Ryvas jumped aside and the club struck BaShell's hard shell. BaShell bit down with anger swinging his head to the right, and throwing the saber clear of his

queen. The saber tumbled through the air. The Ocean Warrior fell like a rock, his golden tunic whipping like the tail of some crazy kite as he plummeted toward the royal pyramid balcony. Two more sabers shot after BaShell.

Ryvas made a daring move. She screamed out, “back slam him BaShell!” Then she scurried around her beast until she was clinging to his under belly. BaShell flew hard. At the last possible instant he flipped forward so that his hard shell smashed into the first saber. The beast tried to open its jaws. It wanted to bite the saucer-beast. But, BaShell’s hard shell was too big. The saber roared in pain. It was thrown back through the open sky. The Ocean Warrior clinging to its fur was thrown forward, his teeth smashing into the back of his saber head. His fingers lost their grip and he slid off his steed.

The second saber moved in. It slammed into BaShell’s side. One paw clawed at his hard shell. The other dug into his soft belly, just missing Ryvas. The saber’s teeth were about to come down on BaShell.

Ryvas scurried up BaShell. She leaped onto the head of the Saber. In one fluid movement she smashed both fists into the beast in the eyes, flipping in a hand-springing movement that ended with both feet kicking the Ocean Warrior across his bearded chin. The beast roared. The Ocean Warrior was knocked halfway off his beast.

A third Saber came out of nowhere. It moved in, snatching Ryvas with its forepaws. BaShell’s turtle head reached desperately trying to bite down on the saber’s hind leg, but the saber with punched in eyeballs held firm.

Ryvas screamed, “Help!”

My heart dropped. “I’m coming Ryvas!”

Warwick’s wings beat hard. The salty air whistled past my face. As we flew, Warwick wound up and punched the saber. He hit the saber so hard, it was knocked out cold. It dropped Ryvas. Warwick snatched her up. He tossed her back to me. The saber and his Ocean warrior plummeted toward the beach. It took three other sabers to catch them.

Warwick tried to fly back to Selma and the giants. It was no use. We were surrounded. Two sabers lunged at Warwick. He grabbed a saber tooth in each hand and smashed the two tiger heads together. They fell. He punched another saber in the face.

As it fell, the Ocean Warrior swung his club. Warwick caught the club. He yanked it free, daring anyone to come close.

A shrill call echoed through the air. It was Selma. She was screeching, “Stop! STOP! STOP!”

I looked from face to face. Everyone looked confused. I think Warwick wanted to keep fighting. It was in his nature. The Sabers were born to battle, and so were the saucer-beasts. This would not be easy.

Selma’s musical voice returned. “King Zelig, we must council. I have brought all the royal families.”

The warrior with the golden tunic flew up. His saber was huge.

“I have no need to council.”

Selma was a true diplomat. She bowed her head respectfully. “Good king, it is not I who demands a council, but the stars.” She looked up to the dim glow of green. “They are dying, Zelig.”

“That is no concern of mine.”

Selma ignored his comment. “I have brought Queen Ryvas of the desert, and King Issaquah of the forest. Will you parley?”

King Zelig jammed his heels into his saber. The beast lunged forward, clamping down upon Selma. Her head was halfway down its throat. Her owl talons stuck out between the two saber fangs. Some of Selma’s feathers floated toward the ocean below.

Zelig bellowed, “I will be the one to decide when we talk.”

Warwick went crazy. He shot across the sky so fast the wind felt like Velcro pulling across my face, arms, and chest. It was a miracle that I was able to stay atop the rocketing warrior-bird. He slammed into the saber, his hands locking on the beast’s fangs. Warwick’s face looked scared, angry, and hurt all at the same time. Veins rippled in Warwick’s arms as he pulled the fangs apart. Selma slid a little, but the beast still held her in its maw.

The saber let out a mew of pain.

Warwick looked over the saber's head. King Zelig stared back. Warwick's eyes were stones of fire. "I will rip these fangs apart. Knyfang will be no more than a pussycat."

Zelig screamed, "Knyfang!"

The Saber tried to pull free of Warwick's grip. His wings beat hard. He pulled his head to the right, and then to the left. But, Warwick held him fast.

Knyfang let out a hiss. He dropped Selma.

Warwick caught her in his arms and pulled her under his protective wings. "Selma, are you alright?"

"Just a little slimy, but I'll be fine." She turned her head as only an owl can and looked through Warwick's wings at the King. "Will you please parley?"

Before he could answer, Warwick's hand shot out from under his feathered wing. He snatched Knyfang by the forehead and shook the beast's head back and forth. Zelig was almost thrown from his steed.

Warwick wasn't asking. He screeched at the king. "Land!"

I knew Warwick was a little scared. He had almost lost Selma. I wondered if he would finally admit that he loved her. His face was drawn, his feathers flat, and he kept staring at Selma with watery eyes.

Zelig said, "Let go of my saber. We will land."

Warwick's eyes never left Selma's. He let go of Knyfang. Everyone flew to the pyramid-castle. Warwick took a deep breathe. He waited a moment, hovering high above the ocean waters.

"No more risks Selma. Knyfang could have killed you."

"We must save Annathmaw, or we will all die."

"I cannot lose you. I never told you, but I think you know. I... I... I..."

"Warwick... I've always known. You say we're only friends. That's funny."

Warwick looked dumbfound.

"Everyone knows." Selma leaned forward and gave him a peck on the cheek. "I think I fell in love with you the moment you kicked free of your shell."

Chapter 14

I'm Almost Eaten

Warwick's feathers were still a little red with the shock of being kissed. He flew to the castle-pyramid. Spector had climbed to the top of the pyramid's golden tip. He spun a low hanging web and suspended himself above the balcony. Warwick tossed me to Spector. He caught me with two of his outstretched legs. It was like being caught by a bungee cord. Spector and I bounced several times. Warwick landed beside Selma on the royal balcony. The floor was concrete with white glistening marbles. I looked closer and realized that the marbles were actually pearls. The Ocean Warrior King stood beside his saber. Both Zelig and Knyfang stared at the horde below. The Desert Rider Queen stood beside her Saucer-beast. Ryvas and BaShell looked upon Zelig and the saber. The Forest King positioned himself upon the pyramid steps. His hands were like massive roots gripping the balcony railing. Surik was perch upon Issaquah's shoulder.

All the tribes of Annathmaw gathered before the castle-pyramid. No one moved. No one made a sound.

Selma opened her beaked mouth. The words came out in a musical rhythm. "People of Annathmaw...." She paused, looking to the sky. "Look to our stars. Once so beautiful. Once so bright. Now they die."

Zelig interrupted the musical warning. “I have always left you alone. For years my warriors wanted to capture you. They believed capturing the great Seer would give us control over all the tribes. With you in our dungeons we could see what every other tribe planned.” Zelig shouted, “We would have seen this attack.”

“This is no attack. This is a plea to unite; an appeal to awaken from our ignorance and stop warring. Hatred is killing the planet. Can’t you see that?”

Knyfang stared at me. His eyes were black pools of hunger. Drool slid down his long, saber-fangs.

Selma pleaded, “Zelig, you are a great leader. You love your people. Can you learn to love all of Annathmaw?”

I have seen the future. There are two possibilities. The first is peace, a return of the paradise that died so long ago.

Zelig, your people live longer than any other. You were alive during the Triad Celebrations.”

The warrior king’s beard shook with anger. “Those days are past. I was just a boy, but I remember my friend. His name was Aidan. He was killed by a Forest Giant.”

Selma remained calm. “I know of Aidan. I did not hatch until after the Triad Celebrations. However, I do not believe that a Forest Giant killed your friend.” She paused, letting that idea sink into Zelig’s brain.

“I never knew the excitement of the Surf Out, Capture the Squachat, or the Desert Run. Do you remember the Triad?”

The king just looked out at the ocean.

Selma answered for him. “During the Triad Celebrations, our suns were bright. The land was alive. Plants grew healthy with lush green leaves, and fruit was plentiful.

Now, death is everywhere. But I see visions. I see the return of the Triad Celebration. I see the return of our suns and their green light. I have foreseen the healing of our planet. It begins with Chase Althea.

Zelig’s words were bitter. “I have heard this talk of peace. Even your mother spoke of such foolishness. It is a fairy tale. But, I will humor this vision of yours. Are you certain the boy of Earth can save our planet?”

Selma nodded her owl head.

“Fine. Let us make a little wager.”

He paused, looking at Knyfang’s hungry eyes and then back to Selma. “Are you willing to bet your life? Are you so certain that this boy of Earth can save our planet that you would risk your life?”

“Yes.”

“So be it!” The king smiled. “It has been a long time since I’ve had roasted fowl.” He looked up at me. “I am sure Knyfang will love to chew on your bones.”

Warwick stepped forward. He gave the king a hard shove, knocking Zelig to the ground. Knyfang lunged for Warwick. BaShell jumped between them. He held Knyfang firm.

Issaquah placed a hand on Warwick’s shoulder, “This is not the way. Haven’t you heard Selma? We need to stop warring.”

The crowd below began to push and shove. We were on the brink of battle; the second future, the one Selma did *not* mention.

Chapter 15

I make Abe Proud

I asked myself, “What would Abe do?”

It came to me in an instant. I jumped from Spector’s web, landing in the center of the commotion. I screamed at the top of my lungs, “Four score and seven years ago!”

Everyone froze. Even the horde below looked up in wonder. There were thousands of desert riders and saucer-beasts, forest giants and squachats, and ocean warriors and saber. They all looked to the castle-pyramid and the royalty on its balcony.

King Zelig said, “What?”

“The greatest president my world has ever seen said those exact words. He used them to remind our country that it was founded with the idea that all men were created equal, that we must treat our neighbors as if they were our brothers and sisters.”

My voice echoed from pyramid to pyramid for all to hear. “You have common bond, you are all Annathmawians.”

Knyfang snarled, “I have nothing in common with this flying tortoise. He is ugly and his breath stinks.”

I knew Knyfang’s insult was a challenge. He wanted to provoke BaShell. I

stepped under Knyfang. His long saber tooth was an inch above me. A film of drool slid down his fang.

An image of Sheldon Slack popped into my mind. In my mind's eye Sheldon had pinned me to the ground with a luggy hanging from his mouth. *Was that only yesterday?* It seemed like a million years ago. I wondered, *why did Sheldon pick on me? Why did he pick on anyone for that matter?*

I slapped BaShell's chest. "You are a bully. You go around acting big and bad. The first time we met, you were creepy. You were darn right mean."

BaShell looked confused.

"But, now I am your friend. You are funny, and I like talking with you."

I turned on Knyfang. I slapped him and couldn't help but notice how soft his tiger fur was. "I think you *do* have a lot in common with BaShell. You are a bully times ten. But, I look at the way you treat your king and know that you are the same as BaShell. You love your king. You two could be great friends.

BaShell, why do you fight Knyfang? What makes you so angry?"

The saucer-beast's eyes flared red. "He tried to hurt my queen. He thinks he's so tough. I would love to knock him down a notch."

"Give it a try stumpy. It's a good thing you got wings, or it would take you all day just to walk across this balcony."

The saber leaned forward so that his teeth were directly above my head. I hit his chest. "What about BaShell? Didn't he attack your king? Doesn't he act tough too?"

Knyfang nodded. "Yeah!"

"BaShell, if queen Ryvas and King Zelig were comrades; if they were true friends the way Ryvas and I are, would you protect Zelig the way I know you would protect me?"

"Of course I would."

"Knyfang, is it the same with you, would you protect the desert queen?"

Knyfang snarled, but he also nodded. "Yes, but I don't think my king would be friends with a desert rider."

"BaShell, what do you need from Knyfang? What would it take to be his friend?"

His tortoise eyes glared down at me. I could tell that he was confused by my behavior. After all, he thought that I would take his side. “Is my queen friends with Zelig?”

“That’s his royal majesty to you, Stumpy.”

I was doing my best to stay calm. I kept thinking about Abraham Lincoln and his Gettysburg Address. “Yes, Queen Ryvas and King Zelig are friends. What do you need from Knyfang?”

“I need him to stop glaring at everyone. Stop showing off his stupid fangs. It makes me want to knock his block off.”

Knyfang started to laugh. I thought my plan had backfired, but Knyfang said, “That’s funny Stumpy. You think that I am a show off and I think that you’re a show off. Everyone knows that nothing, not even my teeth can penetrate that shell of yours. You always strut your stuff. You prance around flaunting your impenetrable shell. It just irks me. It makes me want to fight.”

My plan was working. “Knyfang, what do you need from BaShell?”

The saber took a deep breath. He was obviously uncomfortable. “I need BaShell to chill out. He’s the one who always acts tough. He’s the one who provokes fights.”

Now it was my turn to take a deep breath. “Why do you think you two act like bullies?”

Knyfang jumped forward. His two fangs were on either side of my head. He spoke over me directing his answer to BaShell. “I think you are acting like a saucer-beast. Just like me. I am acting like a saber. I am not trying to start a fight.” He hunched his neck and looked down at me. “I see what you’re trying to do earth-boy.”

“So do I.” King Zelig stepped forward. “Selma, I owe you an apology. You were right. I believe this boy of Earth will save our planet.”

Deep wrinkles circled his eyes and a broad smile stretched across his face. “Chase, you’ve convinced me.” He knelt down on one knee and reached for Ryvas’s hand. His Viking face turned soft and his eyes reflected joyful memories.

“Ryvas, our people were once great friends. Believe it or not, saucer-beast and Saber used to bask side by side on these beaches. Your beasts are very good swimmers. In the days of the Triad they were lifeguards.”

Ryvas retorted, “Perhaps they will be again.”

Zelig stood. He walked over to the balcony’s railing placing his hand on the Forest Giant’s. “Issaquah, I must admit, I am confused. For years I wondered why a giant would drown my friend Aidan. I remember us all being such good friends. Now Selma says it was not a giant. I do not know what to think. What I do know is that the time for forgiveness is at hand.”

Zelig took a deep breath. He seemed to be thinking about things that happened long ago. “Did you know that your forefathers lifted the blocks of these pyramids? My kingdom would not be if not for the Forest Giants.”

Issaquah bowed his head. “I am grateful that you remember. It is time.” He reached over the balcony grabbing King Zelig in one hand and Queen Ryvas in the other. The giant turned so that he was facing the crowd, holding the royalty of Annathmaw in his two hands. His voice boomed out over sand and surf. “People of Annathmaw, today we reunite. We become a planet of one. Today we celebrate the Triad.”

The crowd howled. The years of hatred seemed to wash away with the waves. They moved about shaking hands, and laughing. The forest giants towered over everyone. They bent low shaking hands with Desert Riders and Ocean warriors, with saucer beasts and sabers.

Their Squachats hopped from creature to creature repeating, “So nice to meet you.” and, “my but you have soft skin,” or “what a fine shell,” or “a fine shade of skin color, it matches out beautiful skies,” or “that is a grand beard, it make you look noble.”

The sabers and saucer-beasts grabbed one another’s shoulders. Each shook the other, then they head-butted, laughed and started talking as if they were age old friends.

I looked upon the multitude of creatures below. Abraham Lincoln would be proud. I had done it; I had saved the planet of Annathmaw.

Someone shouted, “Let the Triad begin!”

I looked up at the stars expecting that somehow they would spring to life. But nothing had changed. Perhaps I expected too much. I thought that the stars would burst forth with green light, that the land would come alive, and that fruit would begin to grow.

Chapter 16

An Ancient Secret

The sound of laughter and merriment echoed across the beach. Sounds of renewed friends reverberated off the pyramids and out over the Great Ocean. The hum of healing rippled through the waves until they reached the ears of the water dragon.

ObisPo's head crested the water. Her dark eyes scanned the beach. There was talk of renewing the Triad. ObisPo fumed. She had worked so hard to destroy Annathmaw.

For thousands of years ObisPo had loved the creatures. Now she despised them. She was the one who created the Triad. She would fly over the competitors as they raced through the desert. She would referee the capture of the squachat, and she would create the waves for the surf out.

But everything changed. On that fateful day so many years ago, it was not ObisPo creating the waves. It was a hurricane. As the storm raged on, the waves grew higher and higher. The tribes of Annathmaw thought that ObisPo was creating the waves. They became more and more excited.

ObisPo saw the danger. She had to keep her people safe. She swam out to sea thrashing her tail against the oncoming waves; trying to stop the storm.

But, not even ObisPo could stop the doom that was headed their way.

Back on the beach, the surfers entered the water. The Forest Giants mounted their long boards, the Desert Riders and Ocean Warriors used short boards. Waves were crashing into the beach. Riptides pulled the competitors out to the open waters.

The hurricane raged. The wave turned vicious. Surfers dropped between waves. All they could see was a wall of water. The spectators watched in horror.

An Ocean Warrior named Aidan was thrown into the air. A wave hit him and he flew sideways. He crashed into the turbulent water. His board went one way. He went another. The line connecting his board to his ankle snapped.

A Forest Giant was thrown from his board, then Desert Rider. Soon all the surfers were fighting for their lives, trying to stay afloat.

The saucer-beasts flew from the beaches. They dove into the waves. Their wings were tucked in tight. They used their webbed feet to swim. They pulled one surfer after another back to shore. They saved all but one, a promising young surfer named Aidan. He was an Ocean Warrior, a personal friend to the young prince Zelig.

By the time ObisPo returned, sadness turned to anger and anger to hatred. They aimed their hatred at ObisPo. They threw rocks and screamed out hateful words, blaming ObisPo for the loss of young Aidan.

ObisPo sank under the choppy waters. She vowed never to return. But then her anger grew. Didn't they realize that she had tried to save them? Weren't they the ones who entered the Great Ocean? She did not force them to surf. They were idiots. They were the ones at fault, not her.

ObisPo's sorrow ignited, bursting into hate. She renewed her vow. She *would* return. She would return and use her magic.

It did not take long. ObisPo's magic was powerful. Soon all tribes feared one another. ObisPo twisted memories. She made the Ocean king believe that the Forest Giants had killed Aidan.

She made Ryvas's great, great grandfather fear the sabers. Why would the Ocean people need the fanged creatures? Perhaps, it was because they want to take over the entire planet?

ObisPo used her magic like a vision from Selma. She made the Forest Giants paranoid. The Riders lived in a desert. It was only a matter of time before they would try to claim the forests as theirs.

Chapter 17

An Age Old Hatred

The dragon watched as the bird-woman spoke. ObisPo knew her. She was the seer, Selma Oswin. She had magic too. She could see into the future.

But ObisPo's magic was stronger. She hated the people. Annathmaw was almost dead. So close. What had happened? What had stopped the warring?

The dragon swam to the surface. She would use her magic once more. She swam round and round, up and down in a circular motion. A whirlpool began to form. The water grew more violent with every thrust of her tail.

Water lapped up and onto the beach. Waves shot up, pulling sand back into the water; into the whirlpool. A few people looked at the rising water, but it was too late.

A tremendous wave swept in. It knocked a Desert Rider off his feet. In an instant, he was sucked out to sea.

Three saucer-beasts dove to his rescue. A second wave raced in. This one took five Ocean Warriors, a Forest Giant, and three squachats. More saucer-beasts entered the rescue.

The third wave was enormous. It grabbed a multitude of creatures, pulling them into the hungry waters. The waterlogged creatures were swimming for their lives. They kicked and screamed. They struggled for air. But the whirlpool's pull was great.

Waves slammed onto the beach. The horde of creatures backpedaled, trying to escape. There were too many creatures and not enough room. One tripped, another. The water rushed in sweeping them all out to sea.

The entire regiment of saucer-beasts dove into the water. Each gathered two or three drowning victims. They tried to swim for shore, but it was no use. The whirlpool was too powerful. It pulled them into its circle of death.

The sabers' fur became drenched with water. They were sinking fast. They flapped their wings, but the mighty waves made it impossible for them to take flight.

BaShell flew from the balcony. Knyfang was right behind him. I jump atop Warwick and we soared through the air.

Thick lines of webbing shot past us. Spector caught five sabers before the waves could claim them. His voice screeched out, "fly, you overgrown cats!" His pitch-fork leg was pointing toward the Whirlpool.

The sabers jumped into the air. Spector was held by five thick strands of his own webbing below them. Once over the victims, he concentrated on the saucer-beasts. The first was a beast closing in on the center of the whirlpool.

Spector's web slapped onto his hard shell. It stuck like glue. The giant spider hauled the saucer-beast in. The beast had two desert riders and four squachats clinging to him. The sabers hauled Spector and his charges to safety. They dropped the waterlogged victims on a nearby pyramid and returned for more.

Warwick and I flew above the waves. They seemed to have a mind of their own. The tips of each wave were topped with foam. They seemed to reach up to us, trying to knock us from the sky.

Warwick shot into the center of the whirlpool. He grabbed two sabers, lifting them fifty feet above the water. He tossed them into the air.

The sabers shook their fur. Salty water shot out in all directions. They opened their wings and flew. The saber rejoined the rescue, carefully steering clear of the waves.

Warwick dove. This time we rescued a Forest Giant. Warwick struggled to pull the heavy giant from the waves. A Saber joined. He helped and together we took him to the beach.

The saucer-beasts were having a heck of a time. The rush of water pulled on their shells. Warwick tried to help a one, but its shell stuck like a plunger.

Warwick tipped the beast. The water poured out from under its shell. Warwick threw the beast like a Frisbee. The beast had a squachat, two Ocean Warriors, and a Desert Rider clinging to his shell. They all shot out in different directions.

The sky was filled with creature of every sort; sabers, saucer-beasts, and even a suspended spider. They shot out after the squachats, Ocean Warriors, and Desert Riders.

The saucer-beast opened his wings. He stopped spinning and started flying. The sabers saw Warwick's technique and drove into the whirlpool. Creatures of every size and shape were thrown from the water. Sabers, saucer-beasts and Spector caught one victim after another. All were carried to safety.

There was only one left. It was an Ocean Warrior. She was tall. Her long blonde hair was drenched with heavy salt water. She spun round and round the whirlpool, sinking deeper and deeper.

Warwick dove. The salty air shot past my face. It was difficult to breath. All around us water churned. It was a spinning vortex of hungry water.

My eyes focused on the woman. We were close to the bottom. A violent spinning point the size of a basketball. The water spun closer and closer.

The woman kicked her feet. She reached up. Then she was sucked under. I screamed. Warwick reached. His hand was in the water. A powerful tug pulled.

Warwick's wings slapped against the wall of water. We were moving up. We had her. We had the ocean woman.

The whirlpool funneled outward. We were almost to the top. There was more room now, and Warwick's wings were beating hard, pulling us higher and higher.

We were almost to the surface. I sensed something. I had no idea what it was, but I knew it was coming for us. The water moved. The thing had to be the size of a whale, yet it was no fish.

Warwick and I shot out of the whirlpool. He held the woman close to his chest. A great cheer echoed out to sea. The tribes of Annathmaw thought it was over. Warwick handed the woman to Knyfang.

I screamed. "Look out!"

Chapter 18

ObisPo's Return

The dragon shot out of the water like a great shark. Its teeth snapped together. They just missed. Long green wings spanned the sky. Warwick zipped this way and zagged that way, but the dragon was right on his tail. Razor sharp teeth clamped down on Warwick's tail. A mouthful of feathers were yanked free.

The dragon turned toward the beach. Her head was green with red markings around the eyes. Dark scales glimmered in the dying light. Her tail lashed back and forth like a powerful whip, and her long talons ended in red claws that clenched tightly.

The dragon circled the crowd on the beach. Her head reared back. It lashed down, spitting a shower of flames towards the creatures below.

The saucer-beasts flew into position. They covered the Annathmawians, using their hard shells to ward off the incinerating flames. The flames crackled and sparked.

King Zelig spurred Knyfang. "To battle!"

Knyfang leaped into the air. Zelig's beard was whipped against his face. He steered Knyfang toward the dragon's flank. Knyfang's forepaws gripped ObisPo's side.

He thrust his saber-teeth into the dark scales. ObisPo shrugged him off. She whipped her tail and sent Knyfang and Zelig tumbling through the sky.

The entire legion of Ocean warriors joined in the battle. The Desert Riders mounted their saucer-beasts.

The ones who were not deflecting fire attacked. The Forest Giants threw their squachats at the water dragon. The squachats scratched, clawed, and bit.

The dragon lashed back and forth across the sky. She spit fire. She whipped her tail. She slashed with her claws. The riders, warriors, beasts, sabers, and squachats poured from the sky.

Spector tried slowing the dragon. He shot out thick lines of webbing, but it was no use. Lines of broken web hung from the flapping wings.

Warwick and I were just about to dive in upon the water dragon when Selma Oswin flew to us. She placed a hand on Warwick's face. Her eyes were soft with hope.

"The dragon is our last obstacle. We must find a way to calm her." Her eyes moved to me.

"Chase, go to the Poem Tree. Choose a leaf that is soft to the touch. Let your heart guide you. Bring the leaf here, bring it to ObisPo."

Selma flew to the castle-pyramid. She called out for Spector.

Warwick turned toward the beach. His wings beat furiously and we hit breakneck speed. We soared across the sand dunes, over the dead forest and through the desert. I saw the place where we almost drowned and realized just how much we had accomplished. We could not fail now.

Warwick landed upon the Poem Tree. I gazed at the tree. It was a multitude of rainbow-colored leaves. The entire tree seemed to glow. Perhaps it knew something that I did not.

I wondered what Abe would do. I had to pick the right leaf, but how would I know which one? There were thousands of leaves. What if I chose the wrong leaf? Would the entire planet die? My mind was whirling with dreadful thoughts.

"Relax, take a deep breath and let the leaf pick you."

At first I thought Abraham Lincoln was speaking from the grave. But then I realized it was Warwick.

I took a deep breath. My eyes closed and I listened. I reached out feeling one leaf at a time. The first one felt cold. It seemed as angry as ObisPo. I thought that this might be the one. Perhaps if the dragon saw her own anger she would understand the futility of hatred.

No. Not this one. Commiserating anger only begets more anger. The next leaf was rough with little ridges that tickled my fingertips. I wondered if laughter was the answer. It had worked for the saucer-beasts. Perhaps ObisPo needed to feel the healing emotions of laughter. Once again, it didn't feel right for the dragon.

The next leaf had fuzzy hairs on its bottom. The next one was dry, the next slippery. I felt leaf after leaf searching for the right one.

I found it; the perfect leaf for ObisPo. It was warm to the touch. When I held it between my finger and thumb my heart rejoiced with the love of family. I could almost feel my dad hugging me, my mom squeezing me tight and kissing my forehead. I felt a burst of cheerful bliss spread throughout my entire body.

I opened my eyes. The leaf was a cool green color. It reminded me of the stars above. It had deep red veins running through it.

"I got it!"

I plucked the leaf and leapt from the tree. Warwick caught me in midair. We shot out towards the Great Ocean

A handful of Desert Riders and Ocean Warriors were still at battle. There were several small fires burning upon the sandy beach. The Forest Giants were hiding behind the pyramids. They were an easy target for the dragon.

Others lay spread out upon various pyramid balconies; heaps of exhausted, and waterlogged creatures. Spector was pulling warriors from the water, but his movements were slow with fatigue.

Warwick flew to ObisPo. The water dragon lashed out with her tail. She struck Warwick across the face and sent us spinning out of control. I clung to Warwick's

feathers. We turn over again and again. One moment I saw the blue movement of the waves, and the next I saw the dark skies. We were falling.

I could feel the spray of the turbulent water when Warwick's wings shot open. He caught a blanket of air and we headed back to ObisPo. She swung at us with her wing. Warwick reared back. Her teeth snapped at me. Her tail swung like a whip. Warwick dipped one way, and then another. He barely avoided each assault.

ObisPo lifted her head. She drew in a great gulp of air. Her head shot forward and fire flew from her mouth. We would have burned if not for BaShell.

Ryvas steered him in front of the flames. She swung herself around so that she was on BaShell's belly. The princess arched back to look at me.

"So nice to see you again."

She winked. I blushed. The firestorm crackled around BaShell's back. Sparks showered us.

I called to Warwick. "Go high. Get above her head."

Warwick took off. He soared high above the dragon. She had no idea where we were. She kept spitting fire at BaShell. I pointed to ObisPo's head.

Warwick dove. He was about to collide when I screamed, "Pull up!"

Warwick pulled in an amazing arc. We were inches from her when I jumped. I leapt off Warwick and onto ObisPo's scaly neck.

Her rippling scales were soft. They offered secure hand holds. ObisPo whipped her head to and fro. She snapped her teeth, trying to bite me. I scrambled, moving frantically up her neck. Her head swung about. I almost fell.

I jumped, lunging for the base of her head. My arms wrapped around her neck and I pulled myself up to her ears. Her head moved frantically. My legs squeezed about her neck. I reached out with both hands and tore the leaf.

ObisPo froze at the sound.

The leaf sang out,

"Listen to my scream of sorrow

I thrash with anger.

Hear my cry of despair

*I spit a firestorm of grief.
Feel my touch of desolation
I float in a sea of melancholy.
Taste my heart's bitterness
I look through eyes of solitude.
Smell my fear
I weep in an ocean of quarantine.
For I am ObisPo - isolated and alone.*

The healer has come.

*Drop into Annathmaw's clouds of forgiveness
feel their wet, healing tenderness.
Roll in leaves of rejuvenation
feel their loving touch.
Blow the trumpet of happiness
feel the smoky tentacle of joy
Let it rise up and spread throughout our people.
For you are a playful dragon,
the protector,
our guide.”*

Chapter 19

The Healing Begins

ObisPo was perfectly still. The leaf's simple message brought memories of the past. Her anger was gone. All she felt was sorrow for the loss of young Aidan.

“It’s all my fault. I should have stayed here. I should have protected my little friends.”

The Annathmawians were stunned. What was this dragon saying?

ObisPo settled down beside the castle Pyramid. Warwick and I flew to the balcony. Selma and Spector, Ryvas and BaShell, Zelig and Knyfang, and Issaquah and Surik were all standing before the dragon. The people of Annathmaw slowly came out from hiding. They gathered around ObisPo’s scaled claws, looking up at the great beast and not knowing what to expect.

ObisPo's forked tongue shot out. Her voice sounded as if it came from the depths of a fiery furnace. "I tried to stop the hurricane. I should have stayed here. I should have protected my little people."

Zelig seemed to be the only one to understand the dragon. "That was a long time ago. None of this is your blame."

"Oh, but you are wrong King Zelig. I am very much to blame."

ObisPo looked down upon the Annathmawians. "I felt guilty. A boy had died, and I could have saved him. My guilt turned to anger."

She lifted a long claw and pointed it at Zelig. "I used my magic to make your father believe that a Forest Giant drowned your friend."

Her claw moved to Ryvas. "I made the giants think that your people wanted their land. I made your great, great grandfather distrust the Ocean Warriors and their sabers. So I am to blame."

Selma step forward. Her voice was a soothing melody that sang out for all to hear. "The time for forgiveness is at hand. We have all done things that we are not proud of. Our planet is dying, and there is but one way to heal it. We must heal ourselves; we must forgive not only our neighbor, but ourselves as well. That means you ObisPo."

The water dragon dipped her head. Her eyes were half closed and she took a moment before speaking.

"Thank you. A heavy sorrow has lifted. I do forgive myself. I want to start anew."

She reached out to me. Her fore claw wrapped about my entire body. She lifted me high for all to see. "Here is the one who started the healing. Without Chase Althea our planet would have died."

ObisPo bowed. The Annathmawians followed in suit. I could feel the heat of her words as she spoke.

"Chase Althea, you are a great leader. We thank you."

She stood and said, "To Chase!"

The horde echoed, "To Chase! To Chase! To Chase!"

Chapter 20

A Sign from the Stars

Issaquah shouted, “Let the Triad begin!”

Zelig screamed, “Let’s have a Surf Out!”

Ryvas said, “The Desert Run is next.”

We were all gathered upon Zelig’s balcony. The Ocean Warriors were running to their pyramids and pulling out surfboards that had been dust covered for years. Ryvas looked at me with those blue eyes of hers. She reached out and wrapped her green fingers about mine.

“You know you are my boyfriend Chase. You can not leave until after the Triad Celebration.”

I smiled. I think I was ready for my first crush. But this holding hands stuff was a little much for me. I couldn’t help it. My face turned warm, and my heart raced. It felt weird, weird but good.

“... on to Capture the Squachat.” Issaquah was saying.

A brilliant green light exploded from above. I looked up and thousands of stars came to life. It was as if someone turned the dimmer switch. The entire land about us looked magical.

A sprinkling of rain poured down, and life returned to Annathmaw.

The surf out was a grand competition. ObisPo created the perfect waves.

It was the first time a Forest Giant won the competition. Afterwards we ate clams and danced on the beach.

The next day we moved to the desert. The shrubs were in full bloom with flowers and juicy fruits. Ryvas and I stood side by side watching the runners as they raced past her royal cave. There was another feast, and another dance. We had the same fruit that Warwick and I choked down that first day

. Today they were sweet and crunchy.

The most exciting event of the Triad was Capture the Squachat. The dead forest had transformed into a spectacular rain forest with green leaves and flowers of every color. The Squachats were hidden throughout the canopy and whichever group caught the most squachats was the victor. I played on Ryvas's team. We won.

We were sitting on a blanket of leaves looking up at the green stars when I felt a sudden pang of sorrow. I missed my mom and dad. How long had I been here? I had no idea.

The green stars started to sparkle. It looked like the fourth of July. I remember the poem.

*The green stars ignite,
Chase Althea must take flight.*

Warwick had said that there would come a time when I would understand the poem. That time was now. I had accomplished what was needed of me here on Annathmaw. The stars had returned and the land was healing.

Warwick seemed to remember the poem too. He looked over at me then up at the stars.

Everyone was enjoying the feast. I walked over to Issaquah and Surik. Issaquah gave a hug and then patted me on my head. He said, "Hurry home, but hurry back too."

Surik said, "I think your smell is growing on me. I actually like it."

I laughed and gave him a bear hug.

Zelig picked me up. "I'm glad Knyfang didn't eat you. You're quite the squachat catcher." His long beard tickled my neck.

Knyfang hopped over nudging his king aside. He gave me a giant tiger lick. His drool was a little gross, but it felt good all the same.

I looked for Ryvas, but she was nowhere to be seen. ObisPo arched her head back and plucked a scale from her back. She craned her long neck down to where I stood.

"Chase Althea," she said through clenched teeth, "if you are ever in need, for any reason whatsoever, simply look into this and call my name. I will come for you."

She shot out her forked tongue. It wriggled up and down tickling my face; another gross but somehow comforting feeling.

Spector's legs clicked like drumsticks on a snare drum. His eight eyes watered. He shot a web out and pulled me into a tight hug. "I will miss you."

He started to cry and quickly turned running on his pitchfork legs to a tree where he scurried up and made himself a web.

Selma reached out with her human arms. She pulled me into her soft feathers. After a moment, she held me at a distance. A knowing twinkle sparkled in her eyes. "The next time I see you, you will be a king. I look forward to that day." She bent down and kissed my forehead.

Eitan, Furgus, and BaShell came to me. I thought back to when we first met. I think they were thinking the same. We all started laughing.

I said, "Now don't go taking no naps on soft sand." We laughed anew. They gave me clammy hugs.

Ryvas was standing by a giant sycamore tree. She had been there the entire time. Her green skin blended into the background, but her blue eyes gave her away. Teardrops dotted her cheeks.

I walk over and held her hand. This boyfriend thing was pushing the limit. My heart hurt with the knowing of a loss. More than anything, Ryvas was a great friend.

All of the sudden Ryvas bent down and kissed my hand. My whole body tingled with electricity. I couldn't help but smile. It was embarrassing, but it felt invigorating too.

She spoke in her demanding, royal manner. "Chase, I am the youngest queen of Annathmaw. One day, I will need a king. You will return to me. When you have grown."

Ryvas did not wait for me to reply. She leaned forward and gave me a quick kiss smack-dab on the lips. It was the grossest of all, and it made my whole body quiver. I couldn't move for a moment. I knew that beside Warwick, I would miss her the most.

I climbed aboard Warwick. We shot out of Annathmaw's atmosphere and into space. Tightness gripped my stomach. I might never see Warwick again. I was missing him already. So, I hugged him the whole way home.

As we got closer to Earth, I thought about my parents. I missed my mom and dad, and was happy to be returning. But, for now I was enjoying my last moments with my best friend, Warwick Vladislay.

Chapter 21

My Return Home

Warwick landed in my backyard. He crouched behind a tree and said, "I bent time a bit, so your parents won't even know you were gone."

He gave me a big hug, pulling me deep into his feathers. I closed my eyes. I felt his protective warmth. Tears rolled down my cheeks and into his soft down.

"Will I ever see you again?"

"Selma says yes, but she won't tell me why. She says it's best if I don't know." He placed a hand on my cheek. "I will think of you every day. You're the best friend I have ever had. Come to think of it, I never even had a friend until I met you. Now I have Spector, BaShell, and Knyfang."

"Don't forget Selma."

He looked up to the sky. "She's the only reason I wish to hurry home. I tell you Chase, she sets my heart on fire."

A picture of Ryvas's green face and crystal blue eyes popped into my head. "I think I know what you mean."

Warwick gave me one last squeeze. “Until we meet again.” He kissed the top of my head with his beaked lips and leaped into the air. His wings beat like billowing white sheets, pulling him up and away.

I waved goodbye, and felt my heart drop into my stomach. When he was no more than a speck in the sky I turned and went into my house.

My mother was setting the table. “You’re just in time for dinner, Chase. Go wash up and call your father.”

My mom was still wearing her nursing outfit. Her back was to me, and I couldn’t help myself. I ran up to her and hugged her. What was happening to me? I was an emotional mess. I hugged more people today than in my entire life.

“Are you okay honey? Has Sheldon been picking on you again? I think it time for me to have a talk with that boy’s mother. She’ll...”

“No mom. It’s not that. I just think you’re a great mom.”

She bent down and gave me one of her slobbery kisses. “Oh thank you sweetie. I think you’re a great son. Now go get your dad.”

Chapter 22

Sheldon Slack

As I made my way to school, I listened to the sounds of earth; the light breeze blowing through the trees, the laughter of children walking down the sidewalk, and the call of a parent whose child forgot his lunch. It was good to be home.

I was running late today. Normally, I would be at school by now, but today I was moving a little slower.

“Chase, wait up.” It was Kristina. Edgar, Josh and Sophia were chasing after her. “Are you ready to devour some zebras today?”

“What?”

Edgar chimed in, “Just don’t attack me. I got a bad ankle.”

The dumb look on my face made Sophia give a shove. “The African Biome Project. Remember... you’re the lion.”

“That was yesterday. Don’t you remember Sheldon and the big bird?”

Josh said, “I don’t ever forget about Sheldon.” He looked over his shoulder.

“What big bird?” Sophia asked.

Then I heard the familiar voice of Sheldon Slack. I looked down at the sidewalk. The exact same spot I had been when Sheldon slugged me.

Warwick had said something about bending time. That’s what he meant. It was yesterday.

“Chase Althea!” Sheldon commanded. “Halt and bow to your king!”

I turned to see Sheldon storming down the sidewalk. I had the advantage. I knew his next move. He stopped, ignoring the other fourth graders. His mouth opened in a wide smile. He swung his fist, but I moved faster.

I slugged Sheldon three times in the stomach. It wasn’t enough to hurt the sumo sized sixth grader, but it made him realize that I was no longer afraid of him. I had seen too much in the past few days. I reached up and grabbed a handful of his mopyy-hair. I pulled him down so that we were face to face.

“I like you Sheldon. You remind me of a friend I just met. You’re big and strong, but sometimes you are a jerk.”

Sheldon yanked his head free. He looked as if he was about to smack me in the face.

Josh said, “You shouldn’t talk to his majesty like that.”

“I’ll help you with your grades. That is if you really want help. But if you just want someone to pick on, go find someone else.”

“I thought those pills were supposed to help me.”

“Throw those pills away. They’re just my rabbit’s food. If you really want to do good in school you’re going to need some tutoring.”

“And you’ll do that?” His eyes narrowed and his arm cocked back. “Am I supposed to trust you after you made me eat rabbit pellets?”

I remained calm. “Yes. You were being a jerk. You stole money from Kristina, you made everyone call you *his majesty*, and that luggy trick of yours, yeah, the one you planned on doing to me at recess, well that’s just gross.”

I saw the shock in Sheldon’s eye. He was probably wondering how I knew what he had planned for later today. I continued, “I’m sorry for feeding you my rabbit’s food, but you must admit, you deserved it.”

Sheldon gave a gut rolling laugh. “You know what I think?”

I was a little worried about what he thought.

“I think those rabbit pellets are tasty. Are you going to tutor me?”

“If you want.”

“Yeah!”

“But no more bullying. Not me. Not my friends.”

“What about your enemies?”

“Nope. I don’t have any enemies.”

Sheldon put his arm around me and together we walked to school. It was a strange feeling, having the same arm I feared for so long wrapped about me. But, it felt good too. Sheldon and I lead the way with Sophia, Josh, Kristina, and Edgar in tow. We were still three blocks from school when a thought occurred to me.

“Sheldon.”

“Yeah.”

“You know Caesar of Ancient Rome... the one that you were studying in History?”

“Yeah, He was bomb’n.”

“Yeah, well, he was killed by his royal subjects.”

“What? Is that why you slugged me?”

“No. I just wanted to get your attention. I knew you’d only listen to me if I wasn’t afraid of you.”

“Wow, you are smart.”

“Yes, he is isn’t he?” Kristina had that familiar glow in her eyes.

“I already have a girlfriend Kristina.”

Kristina looked horrified. “You do?”

I looked up into the sky. I imagined Warwick landing upon Annathmaw. I could almost see Ryvas in her desert palace. “Yes I do.”

Kristina turned to Edgar. “Looks like I’m available. I’ve always admired your speed Edgar.

Sophia said, “Chase, you *do* know that Abraham Lincoln was assassinated.”

I looked at Sheldon and he at me. We laughed long and hard. It was the beginning of a great friendship.

From time to time I miss my friends from Annathmaw. I go to my room and hold ObisPo’s green scale. I sit very still and think about my adventures with Warwick Vladislav.