



THE
VISION QUEST

BOOK ONE

DEBORAH PRATT



VGM PUBLISHING

PUBLISHED BY



VGM PUBLISHING, LLC

A division of V Global Media, Inc.
Los Angeles, CA

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ISBN 0-9787309-0-9

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Printed in the United States of America

First Edition
August 2006

Heartfelt thanks to the TVQ forums

To the friends who gave their eyes, time, hearts
and minds and journeyed first inside
The Vision Quest.

Alex Davidson
Peter Brown
Andy Ripper
Geoffrey Payne
Arianna Lyons
Jai Hall
Ashley Petersen
LeVar Burton

Troian Avery Bellisario
Nicholas Bellisario
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Cynthia Cleveland
Barbara Weller
Tanya Buckley



And extra special thanks to:

Aleks Lyons
Nancy Cushing-Jones
Mark Rothstein
James R Kelley
Diane Pratt
Deirdre Pratt
Donna Pratt
Geraldine Bryant Pratt
Bertram Robson Pratt
and
Ethan Peck

***Science and Art are the only effective
messengers for peace.***

—ALBERT EINSTEIN





PART I

CALL TO
DESTINY







COLE LAZERMAN

A fist hit Lazer's face and carried with it the cold, hard smack of pubescent fury. Cole Lazerman, Lazer to his friends and family, was seventeen, handsome, and boyishly charming, with a thick head of dark, rebellious curls. He had piercing electric eyes, one of which had only moments ago been blackened. To add to the new color scheme, a trickle of blood flowed from his lower lip. His body trembled with rage.

Lazer recovered from the blow and retaliated with a left-right combination of well-placed punches that connected squarely with his opponent, Striker McMann. Striker was a tow-headed blond, big-eyed, weasel-lipped brute with no neck and big shoulders—a long-time rival and dedicated enemy of Lazer's since sometime during the summer before sixth grade. Both the fighters wore passage locks, an eight-inch braid of hair that hung down the neck of any young man under the age of twenty. The passage lock was often decorated with silver or gold rings and a few pieces of leather, stone, or feathers to mark a boy's individuality. It was required by law for any boy or girl prior to the Rite of Passage, and every boy who stood and watched the fight wore one as he cheered his chosen hero to victory.

Striker took Lazer's blows in stride and came back with a devastating one-two combination to the stomach and kidney that all but knocked the wind out of him.



“Cashton, do something!” Kyla pleaded with one of the boys. Kyla Wingright was one of the only girls at the skirmish and Lazer’s oldest friend. Kyla was tough, smart, and pretty—almost beautiful but not quite, not yet. She was a second-generation splicer, with what looked like fine, flesh-colored tattoos on her neck and arms that fit the multiple ear and delicate nose piercings. Her strange, intricate markings were the only visible sign that she was not all human. But keeping your genetics to yourself could save your dignity and in some cases, your life—especially in the outback of this partially settled, newly risen continent called Atlantia, which is where Vacary High School was located.

Kyla nudged Cashton harder. “Do something,” she pleaded again.

“What? Striker’s an ass. I can’t change reality.” Cashton shrugged. He, like the rest of the boys, was captivated by the action of the fight.

Cashton Lock was Lazer’s other best friend. He was older, taller, and stockier, with broad features and brown skin the color of amber and honey. Lazer had told him he looked like a fox, always ready to start trouble. The difference was Cashton had the body and build to finish anything he started. But this was Lazer’s fight and the laws of machismo demanded Cashton stay back until Lazer let him know he was needed.

Kyla knew better than both of them that Lazer’s ego would never admit he needed anything, especially help.

A solid right hook to Lazer’s jaw sent him five feet backwards, slamming him hard into the trunk of a tree. Lazer bounced off and plowed into Striker like a human battering ram, sending them both stumbling backwards. They lost their balance and crashed onto the ground with a hard thud. Lazer scrambled to his feet with the agility of a cat that had landed on hot coals. Furious, Striker looked up, jumped to his feet, and ran back to Lazer at full speed, but this time he’d have to go through Kyla.

“Lazer! Striker! Stop it!” Kyla shouted. She stepped between

them, her long sinewy arms stretched out in either direction. To everyone's surprise, she sent out a double energy field that consisted of two spinning circles that spiraled in midair, barely visible but strong and solid enough to stop them in their tracks. The two boys hit the field and staggered, momentarily thwarted. Desperate to be the voice of reason, Kyla shouted again, "You can't fight on school grounds. You're gonna get us all kicked out!"

The two-foot transparent circles hung at face height, spinning in front of Lazer and Striker. Breathlessly, they glared at each other. Kyla held her ground between them. She wasn't particularly talented at the Visionistic Arts, but she had learned a few tricks from her mother—enough to save herself, especially when fear sent a rush of adrenaline through her glands.

They were surrounded by at least twenty other students and every boy's face was filled with the excitement of witnessing a hand-to-hand battle. Like bloodthirsty Romans out for a day of sport at the Coliseum, they wanted more. Not one of them hesitated to voice their displeasure at Kyla's intervention, and they demanded that she drop her shields and back off. Kyla was in the way of today's dose of violence and action.

This group of Vacary High School students were roughneck boys dressed in leathers and jeans, the "in" fashion of the day. Besides the cool t-shirts and jackets, they wore loincloths and tunic overpieces decorated with beading or metal studding in patterns that signified an array of things—from family history to status, sports teams, game-banger ranking, and clan associations.

"Give it up. You lost the game, Striker." Lazer yelled at Striker over the crowd.

"You and your lackey cheated." Striker pointed to Cashton.

Cashton's hackles went up. "Prove it!" Cashton stepped into the mix.

Lazer held Cashton back.

Striker, his nose bleeding, eyeballed Cashton with contempt. "Then it was a freak fluke that zocair ball came back to you like

it was magnetized,” he shouted, pointing to underline his accusations.

“Fluke or not, you lost. Game over.” Lazer dug in deeper. “Don’t make me take you out on *and* off the field.

Striker lunged for Lazer, knocking Kyla to the ground. Her arms had started to tremble and she had released her tiny shields before they drained her and made her faint.

“Security bot. Ice out,” a red-headed splicer named Evvy Tiner shouted as she stepped in, nodding toward something through the trees. Evvy was a tall, lanky cross of human and perhaps orangutan and one of Kyla’s best girlfriends. She was a pretty girl of eighteen whose human genetics dominated everything but her round eyes, odd ears, and the amazing red hair that seemed to grow everywhere. Evvy was a tough outlander, tougher than Kyla, with a dozen inked tattoos that circled her forearms and weaved between the forest of fine red hairs that covered them. She had double the piercings of Kyla—multiple ones in her ears and nose, and a collar of silver pins that looked like a necklace. There was something about Evvy that made people not want to mess with her, but, at that same, something that made them know she was just the person they wanted to watch their backs if the situation got rough.

Everyone turned to see a small camera bot encased in a metal ball. It floated through the forest of trees that grew on the back campus of the high school. Security bots, about the size of a softball, were all over Vacary High School. They floated innocuously inside and out of the school, going unnoticed by anyone who wasn’t committing an infraction against school policy. The bot cruised gracefully across the playing field and hovered twenty feet beyond the tree line. It dutifully spotted the crowd of boys and hesitated. Curious, it studied the odd gathering of students, assessed the situation and, sensing animosity, zoomed in for a closer look.

“You are too funny.” Striker threw his arm around Lazer and started laughing.

Lazer knew the drill. He couldn’t afford a detention this close to

graduation. It was his senior year and getting off Atlantian soil was the goal of his life, so Lazer sucked up his pride and joined in the deception. The rest of the onlookers quickly got the message and started laughing as if the funniest joke of the century had just been told.

Cashton helped Kyla from the ground and gave her a bear hug to hide the fury that was mapped across her face.

The bot observed the students for a moment more, then, reading no hostility, turned and zoomed away.

“You and me at the bilyon caves,” Striker hissed as he pushed Lazer away.

“You and me, and what weapons system?” Lazer’s face filled with a mix of anger and astonishment.

“Weapons system? They’ve been exterminated. It’s just a bunch of empty caves.”

“Are you stupid *and* crazy? There were two sightings last fall,” Kyla added.

“So, they got exterminated too,” Striker glared at Kyla.

“Those caves are their breeding grounds, Jickhead. They come back.”

“Cashton’s right and so is Kyla, you’re crazy.” Lazer said, “I *so* can’t be bothered with you.” He flipped his hand and turned to walk away.

“Cheater and a coward,” Striker goaded Lazer.

Kyla saw it first. She watched his aura go from black anger to red fury. Reading auras was natural among splicers and Kyla was a master at this art. Everyone at school knew not to lie when in her presence.

“Don’t let him goad you, Lazer,” she warned.

“I said, you’re a coward, Lazerman,” Striker smirked with an evil grin. “I thought that stench was from your old man crawlin’ up on all fours like a dog outta the methane mines. But, I guess it’s just you reeking of fear.”

Lazer was not a coward. He had fought hard to dispel the handful of incidents that happened in junior high school that, for a short

and miserably unbearable time, had tagged him with the label of coward. He had gained respect after two years of black eyes and bloody noses and he was not about to let an accusation—from Striker McMann, of all people—take him back down that horrible dark path, especially in front of the meanest boys in school.

“Call it, jickwad. I’m on whenever you say.” Lazer was adamant.

Striker strode over to him and got in his face. “Now. Old bilyon caves.”

“Are you both crazy?” Kyla blurted. The reality and danger of what Striker was suggesting sent a rush of panic coursing through her veins as cold as her non-human blood.

Even Cashton had to chime in, “That is way not a good idea.”

Striker turned to walk away, then stopped to taunt Lazer over his shoulder. “I’m waiting. Or are you so low on the food chain you don’t have the class to see an opportunity when it’s presented to you . . . *coward.*”

Lazer’s eyes glazed over. Any amount of control he had over his anger had just vanished. “Game on.”

The crowd surged forward. They had no intention of missing this massacre. Lazer held up a single hand. “Alone,” he said to the crowd. “Nobody but us. This is personal and, that way, if we get busted . . .”

“Or eaten,” Kyla cut in.

“ . . . no one else gets in trouble,” Lazer finished his thought, shooting a look to Kyla.

Striker agreed, signaling his crew to back off.

Kyla’s eyes stretched wide as she turned once again to Cashton for help. “Cashton, please do something!”

Cashton moved after Lazer. If Lazer were going to fight, Cashton would be there to back him up. Lazer and Striker strode off to the perimeter grids that surrounded the high school. Striker’s second, Chad, fell in step a few feet behind. Cashton and Chad eyeballed each other with “bring it on” intent.

“Just us. No seconds,” Lazer turned back to Cashton.

Striker gave a nod to Chad, who got the message loud and clear. Cashton and Chad stepped back, allowing the duelists to proceed alone.

“Unbelievable,” Kyla muttered in disgust.

“Now what,” Evvy asked, stepping next to Kyla.

“Try and stop them. Keep an eye out for any bots,” Kyla told her. She had no choice but to run after Lazer, her mind reeling, desperate for a solution to quell the testosterone surge that had been unleashed between them. Evvy nodded and Kyla took off.

By the time she caught up, Lazer and Striker had reached the fence. Lazer pulled out a seven-inch laser switchblade that ignited, glowing a fierce red from shaft to tip. It protruded from a sleek bronze and silver tube handle, complete with mother-of-pearl inlay in the shape of a mythical dragon, its wings and tail wrapping gracefully around the shaft. Laser blades were illegal on campus, but everyone who was anyone had one. Lazer had three, once upon a time. His parents had confiscated two before he bought this one in Atland City three months ago. He’d gotten it off a lizard-faced splicer who specialized in exotic splicer pets and small weapons.

Lazer calmly started to burn a five-by-five foot square in the proton-electrified field that surrounded the campus. “We’ve got twenty minutes before that starts to repair.” Striker looked back over his shoulder to make sure the coast was clear.

“Rematch,” Kyla shouted, bounding up to them. “Let’s set a zocair rematch and do this right.”

“Back off, splicer. This is right.” Striker sneered at Kyla.

“Watch it,” Lazer defended Kyla. He had been best friends with her long enough to know that being called *splicer*, especially by a bigoted creep like Striker, hurt and embarrassed her. Lazer grabbed Striker by his tunic.

“Lazer!” Kyla reached out and gently placed her hands on Lazer’s. “He’s not worth it.”

“Trust me, I am,” Striker smirked, challenging Lazer one more time. “A hundred yards more and you can rip me a new face.” Striker

tore himself out of Lazer's grip and stepped through the proton fence. The edges sparked and snapped, already searching for their lost connections.

"Sorry, Kyla, he's a jick," Lazer said, gently laying a hand on her shoulder to make her feel better. "Go back, okay? We'll be done in twenty minutes . . . tops. Go."

In the flash of a moment, Lazer and Striker were running away from her. They quickly vanished over the rolling red- and sand-colored hills of the Atlantian outback and disappeared into a thick outcropping of trees that circled the mitten-shaped granite plateaus that populated the region. Lazer, Cashton, and Kyla used to call them giant, stubby-fingered hands trying to get out from under the ground.

Kyla looked at the closest plateau. It loomed 300 meters high with its flat rock face, pockmarked by a thousand black caves. For seventy years, since the early days of Atlantia, the bilyons had claimed the caves as their breeding ground; it had taken years to clear them out. The bilyons were a man-made species—genetically crossed splicers, half-lion and half-bear. The males were known to grow well over 2,000 pounds. They were, by the genetic predisposition of both breeds, ferocious and extremely volatile. There had been a consolidated effort for five years by the Vacary Township community, when they built the high school, to hunt the bilyons down and exterminate them. Those that survived the slaughter had stayed away. Four years passed without incident, but the multiple sightings last year disturbed the residents and never yielded a kill. Everyone was nervous at the thought the bilyons might be back, and the impending danger made Kyla's stomach turn.

Kyla looked at the hole that still gaped in the proton fence. It had already begun to shoot tiny fingers of electrified proton threads out from the edges. They were searching for corresponding threads to connect to, bond with, and rebuild the almost invisible web-like structure that made up the fence. Kyla hesitated, sighed, and went through the fence.

She glanced nervously at the plateau one last time. *Maybe I can talk some sense into them*, she thought. Kyla ran towards the dense forest of oddly-shaped trees and headed for a tangle of bamboo that grew in a perfect ring around the base of the plateau.

The warm sun quickly faded beneath the canopy of the forest, then vanished completely under the looming shadow of the plateau. The cold granite of the rock wall reached up into the pale, cloudless sky that was trying to peek through the clutter of leaves. Only a narrow clearing broke the canopy and Kyla could not help but glance up at the majestic formation as she ran. The plateau seemed to look down at her, staring with a hundred black eyes—the caves that had been scratched out of solid rock by generations of bilyons. Kyla hoped she was wrong about any of the bilyons being back in those caves. She pulled her eyes away from the plateau and caught site of Lazer and Striker heading into the bamboo forest.

She had shifted her gaze from the plateau, but something inside one of the caves had not returned the favor. There, in the silent face of the rock plateau, a pair of yellow eyes peered out from the blackness of one of the lower larger caves. Two huge round eyes caught the light of the afternoon sun as they moved back and forth from Lazer and Striker to Kyla. The mysterious eyes watched the approaching students.

Lunch had been delivered today.



THE BILYON CAVES

Lazer and Striker raced out of the forest of white-leaved ginkgo trees that formed a perfect outer ring around the towering plateau. They ran up and over a small foothill, thick with green moss and stagnant ponds that sparkled in the dim light. The croaking of the toads and click of the cicada bugs seemed to grow ominously louder the deeper in they ventured. As he ran, Lazer couldn't help but smell the sickeningly sweet stench of something rotting close by. The chilly air filled his lungs. He loved to run; it made him feel free and powerful. He looked at Striker and the anger took hold of him once more, stealing with it the momentary flash of happiness. In silence they ran, disappearing into the lush, jade green glow of the bamboo forest. The trees grew like thirty-foot emerald soldiers and tangled themselves around a smattering of strange fuzzy shrubs and pine trees that seemed to cling to the moist black earth. Suddenly the ground turned to broken rock and went vertical, becoming a wall of rock that reached up into the sky. It stopped them. A few more yards to the left and they would be beyond the probing electronic eyes of the security bots.

They made the turn and found a holographic sign that glitched and shorted off and on as it floated in the air space just above them. **WARNING! DO NOT ENTER! BILYON BREEDING GROUNDS! DANGER!!!**

Lazer and Striker exchanged an uneasy look and continued their trek into the cool shade of the bamboo forest. Finally they reached a clearing, perfect for a showdown of force. Without warning, Striker turned and swung.

Time slowed and Lazer took in every last detail: the high-pitched sound of Striker's fist as it cut through the air, and the stench of his sweat as it whizzed by his nose. Lazer saw a blur of color blended into a ball of knuckles and flesh, and watched as it crept past him, moving as though time itself it had been stretched like a gigantic rubber band. Lazer did a slight bob-and-weave. Time contracted and he snapped back to reality, just in time to see Striker's fist rush past his face with the speed of a bullet missing its mark. Lazer countered with a lightning jab to Striker's cheek, nailing him with a direct hit. Striker tumbled to the ground.

"That's for calling my father a . . ." Before he could finish his sentence, Striker grabbed a long bamboo stalk from the ground, jumped to his feet, and swung. The dried remains of the shaft cut the air with a trill, like the whistle of a flute, and forced Lazer to contract to avoid being hit.

"No weapons!" Lazer demanded, as he scurried backwards.

Striker swung again, this time nearly taking off Lazer's head. Lazer dropped, rolled, whipped out his laser switchblade and seared off two stalks of fresh bamboo. They were green, strong and flexible, and they would hurt if they connected. Lazer grabbed the sticks, dropped his laser blade, and spun around with his sticks crossed and extended, just in time to block Striker's next blow.

Striker pounded on him with the unbridled force of his height, weight, and power. Lazer was on the defensive. He blocked each relentless blow from his adversary, occasionally managing to get in a swing or two. He had to let Striker wear himself down, so he took the blows patiently. He listened as Striker's breath got shorter and quicker, and felt the bone-shattering pounding weaken. *Almost... almost...* and then he saw his opening. Lazer unleashed his counterattack, flailing at Striker with a series of agile but awkward blows. Striker stumbled

back. Neither of them was a trained warrior, but each was a strong athlete and had talent. They fought, driven by pure testosterone and rampant anger. Their blows were wild but occasionally well-placed enough to make the encounter all the more dangerous.

Finally, Lazer held the advantage. He swung left, then right. He blocked, blocked again, then pounded Striker with the left side of the stick. He aimed a barrage of blows at Striker's right-hand side. Again and again he battered Striker, catching him in the arm, shoulder and hand, while gracefully blocking Striker's every blow.

Lazer swung out and caught Striker with a burning crack to his side that bashed the left edge of his ribs. Striker winced as the pain etched itself into his face, surpassing the anger. Lazer had found his rhythm and, sensing it, continued the attack. With a series of well-placed swings, he backed Striker out of the small clearing and pushed him closer to the rock wall.

They continued their relentless attacks as they stood toe-to-toe under one of the large caves, which loomed a good twenty feet above their battleground.

Kyla reached the edge of their little arena and watched, still breathless from the run. She looked through a hedge of fallen pine trees to the narrow shafts of bamboo that grew so tall that they aggressively blocked what little sunlight managed to peek through the dense green canopy of leaves. Slowly, without enough light, the pines had begun to die. Kyla crawled up the large grey trunk of one of the dead pines to get a better look at the fight.

Just as she found them, Lazer took a painful blow to his shoulder. He buckled. Kyla winced. Striker caught one of Lazer's sticks in the face. She winced again. Their auras were a blur of colors—red, black, blue—a haze of emotions swirling around them as they emitted anger, pain and fear. Whose emotions were whose was impossible to tell and she hated having the ability to read them, especially when she was so helpless. There was no way to stop them. They had been looking for an excuse to fight all year; losing a game of zocair was enough to ignite the smoldering fire. The best she could hope to

do was to pick up the pieces and make sure they got back to school before they were missed.

The problem was how to stop the fight and get them to go back. Suddenly her senses prickled her neck. She stretched herself up taller and sniffed the air. Her antennae, which she kept meticulously hidden in the folds of her hair, struggled to extend. Danger! Her feelings of apprehension made the skin markings that ran around the edges of her face and down her neck turn a deep forest green. She was camouflaging! That meant something perilous was very, very close. Kyla snapped her head around to look behind her. Her eyes scanned the trees for movement. She carefully studied each section of the clearing. Nothing stirred. The trees were dead still. Kyla's attention was drawn back to the fight. The boys were locked in mortal combat, oblivious to the danger. Then, she saw something that made her rise up from the shadows and stand in plain sight.

Kyla's mouth fell open. No words would come out. She raised her hand, pointed her fingers and began to tremble. "Bilyon!!!" she screamed. "Twelve o'clock!"

Lazer and Striker turned and looked up at the cave five feet above them. It was empty. Then a bone-shaking roar from higher up captured their attention. It was a fully grown bilyon: 1,500 pounds of half-lion/half-bear with brownish-gold fur, a protruding snout, and a mane that covered the upper half of its body. It looked like a drooling, massive bison with a lion's head, huge teeth, a humpback, and the upper body, forearms, and claws of a grizzly bear. It snarled down at Lazer and Striker.

"Lazer!!!" Kyla screamed again. "Run!"

The bilyon glanced briefly at Kyla, which gave Striker time to bolt around the plateau to the left while Lazer took off to the right.

The bilyon leapt twenty feet from its perch and landed with the agility of a feline, ten feet in front of Lazer. Lazer froze. The massive form of the bilyon blocked his path. It roared—a sound that made every hair on Lazer's body stand on end. It bared its teeth and growled; its drooling mouth hinged open. Lazer held still. His eyes

locked on the creature then, slowly, ever so slowly, Lazer opened his arms and extended the bamboo sticks out and above his head.

The bilyon stopped and reassessed its prey.

Striker vanished through the trees just as Kyla began to step out from the trees and move slowly forward.

“Stay back!” Lazer ordered in a calm but commanding voice.

“That’s not gonna work,” she whispered.

“He’ll think I’m bigger and back down.”

“He thinks you’re lunch! Trust me, run,” Kyla begged.

Before either of them could do anything, the bilyon lunged at Lazer. The creature’s motions were agile and lightning fast.

Lazer sidestepped the advancing beast, swung both his bamboo sticks with every ounce of strength he had, and whacked the creature in the face. The bamboo splintered into a thousand pieces. The bilyon closed one of its eyes and screeched in agony, momentarily giving in to the pain.

Lazer bolted around the right side of the plateau.

Now the bilyon wasn’t just hungry, it was furious. It ran after Lazer with huge strides and covered ground with the speed of a bullet train.

Lazer turned another corner of rock only to find he had run into a dead end. He was trapped. The bilyon appeared at the mouth of the cul-de-sac and stopped. It dragged its paw over its bleeding eye and snarled.

“Climb,” Kyla screamed. She searched desperately for something that would save her friend, and spotted a large, partially fallen pine tree, spilt and broken, that was leaning at a steep angle. The wood was dry and brittle, straining with the expanse of the trunk that was hanging almost directly over the cul-de-sac where the bilyon had Lazer cornered.

Kyla saw Lazer’s fallen laser switchblade and grabbed it. She pulled her own from her vest and ignited them, searing the base of the splintered tree.

The red-hot lasers blistered and burned into the wood, cutting

through the dry fibers that held the weight of the toppled tree. It was taking forever! Kyla rammed the tree with her shoulder. It cracked but held. She burned through a few more inches, then rammed the tree again. She glanced up at Lazer.

Lazer had somehow managed to climb up the crumbling flat face of the rock and was balanced on a small ledge a few feet above the bilyon. He reached for his next fingerhold while, right below him, the bilyon scrambled for footing on the piles of loose rocks that filled up the corner of the hold. The bilyon slipped, anchored, and then leapt up, swiping its huge paw at Lazer's feet. Lazer jumped and grabbed a protruding piece of root that jutted out of the rock a foot above his head. The bilyon fell back and rolled down, regained its footing, and started back up.

Lazer swung from the root until it snapped off in his hand, dropping him precariously back onto the narrow ledge. His feet dug in to hold their footing while he struggled to regain his balance. Twice he almost tipped off the edge and into the jaws of his attacker. The bilyon leaped. Lazer swung the root like a whip, batting back the claws that reached for him again and again. The root gave enough of a sting to keep the grasping claws at bay.

The bilyon swiped its huge paw again and finally caught a piece of Lazer's pants. It tugged, but Lazer managed to jerk himself away. Again the bilyon swiped, this time knocking Lazer forward into the wall. His face smashed hard against the rock and split his lip even wider than Striker's bamboo had done.

The bilyon ran up the loose rock and leapt at Lazer, opening its huge mouth to bite. Lazer spun, pressed his back against the wall, and took the broken root in his hand like a knife and stabbed it straight down into the bilyon's already wounded eye. The bilyon rolled down the rocks and roared in agony.

Kyla cut and pushed at the tilting tree, then used her feet to give a final push. At last the fibers shattered. The tree trunk hung suspended for a moment before it tipped over with an ear-shattering crack and fell directly onto the bilyon's back. The massive trunk slammed the

creature to the ground. It was trapped, pinned beneath the weight of the trunk. The topmost branches swept Lazer off his ledge and dragged him down to the floor of the cul-de-sac. The bilyon's only focus was Lazer. It snarled and snapped at him as he scrambled to get away. A massive paw swiped out at Lazer as he desperately tried to get his footing on the loose rocks. He had to avoid the one free paw.

Lazer jumped away and grabbed again at the rock ledge above his head. The bilyon reached out as Lazer climbed off the rock and tried to cross the tree by balancing in the branches. The bilyon caught Lazer's foot and pulled him down into the branches.

Kyla bounded over and ignited both switchblades, then set the bilyon's fur on fire. The bilyon roared in pain and released Lazer, who bolted as fast as his legs would carry him.

"This way," Kyla shouted.

They ran side by side across the rock clearing and into the bamboo forest. The tortured cries of the bilyon echoed behind them, reverberating off the walls of the plateau and filling the skies with the sound of pure anguish. Neither Lazer nor Kyla was willing to turn back to see if the bilyon was following.

The bilyon pawed at the gravel and rocks, desperate for a foothold to pull itself out from under the tree trunk. Spurred by the flames that bit into its back and flanks, and wild with pain, the bilyon dug its claws into the loose rocks, straining to drag itself free. The bilyon rolled in the dirt to smother the last of the fire. Its body ached and the stench of burned hair and flesh filled its nostrils. Standing up on its hind legs, the bilyon sniffed the air for a whiff of its prey. It heard the snap of branches deep in the bamboo forest to the left, turned its head, and caught the scent of human fear. Burned, pissed, and still hungry, the bilyon took chase.

Lazer and Kyla burst past the white ginkgo trees, darting and weaving along the narrow pathway inside the forest. They both knew the safety of the fence was still a hundred yards away. The bilyon ripped through the bamboo, parting the stalks like blades of grass and knocking away anything in its path.

Lazer checked on Kyla. She was right there next to him. She had saved him. He knew she was strong and fast, but today, without question, she was brave beyond the call of friendship. Lazer heard the snap of the bamboo behind them. He exchanged another glance with Kyla. She'd heard it as well. Gasping for air to fill their exhausted lungs, they commanded their legs to run faster.

Lazer could see the fence that surrounded the school. The opening was well on its way to completely repairing itself. Kyla saw it too.

"Kyla," Lazer said, the terse edge of fear in his voice.

"I see it," Kyla replied.

They burst out of the forest and headed across the clearing. The fence was twenty yards ahead and twenty feet high. The sound of the bilyon as it decimated the trees behind them was getting closer. They were still ten yards away when the bilyon broke through the tree line. There was no way they could reach the fence and recut the hole before the bilyon reached them.

"You owe me big time, Lazer," Kyla blurted out as she ripped off her jacket.

With the bilyon almost on them and another fifty feet left to make the fence, Kyla unfurled the most beautiful set of wings—swallowtail brown, black and gold—from her back. They expanded twelve feet in both directions and caught the air like a glorious silk parachute. Kyla lifted from the ground, flew sideways and grabbed Lazer. "Hold on," she shouted, beating her wings hard against the thermals.

As Kyla struggled to keep both of them airborne, Lazer looked back to see the bilyon closing in, now only six feet behind them. Kyla beat her wings and pulled up higher, slowly rising just enough to clear the fence. It was still ten feet away.

The bilyon leapt up, nipping at Lazer's feet. As he pulled up his knees, the shift in weight dragged Kyla down. "Lazer," she pleaded.

"Higher."

"Can't . . . lift . . ." She grimaced just as they reached the top of the fence.

Lazer could see she wasn't going to get them both over the top. Just as the bilyon leapt to bite his feet, Lazer swung his legs forward, released himself from Kyla and cleared the fence like a high hurdle. Kyla shot upward from the shift in weight and cleared the fence with ease. Lazer hit the ground and Kyla dropped down almost on top of him. They rolled forward and collapsed into a tangle of arms, legs, and wings. Lazer and Kyla unraveled themselves and quickly looked back.

The bilyon crashed head on into 20,000 volts of electrified proton fencing. Sparks and fingers of electricity lit up the bilyon as it jerked and spasmed through the horrifying electrocution. Its body hung suspended in midair, held by the electrified proton fibers as the entire fence surged and the bilyon burst into a fireball. One after another, the power surges caused the school's generators to blow out, sending loud pops and cracks bouncing off the afternoon sky with the echo of a dozen sonic booms.

Lazer and Kyla exchanged an excited, breathless look.

"*Whoa!* You were amazing!" Lazer's face filled with pride and excitement.

"You took on a bilyon!" she said with breathless amazement.

They turned back to watch the bilyon's demise. Out of nowhere, Striker's fist slammed into Lazer's face and knocked him down to the ground.

"Striker, you idiot!" Kyla shrieked.

"I want to know who is responsible for this," a voice suddenly boomed out from behind them.

The three of them turned to see the school's headmaster, Dennis Hastings, closing in on them like a puffed-up angry penguin. He had a bulldog face with a receding hairline and an expression of unbridled fury. His center of focus, however, was on one face alone. "Lazerman!"