

DRAGONS HILL

BOOK III OF THE FIRST YEARS

By: J Barrett

PROLOGUE

About 20 miles outside of Chicago, in one of the well-to-do enclaves that existed before the Great Burning, a large mansion stood on a rise in the center of one of the most exclusive of these. Haunted eyes peered out of the picture window watching men unload weapons and ammo from a large gray produce truck parked in the driveway. Dixon was a large man; his 6'5" frame held a well-muscled and finely tuned body. A scruffy dark beard and long disheveled hair combined with red bloodshot eyes gave him a look that said - 'mess with me at your own peril'. A former Marine Black Ops member; he towered over most men, and could take down any he encountered without much effort. He had been the best in his outfit and took great pride in his abilities; when in the field he was cold, methodical, and emotionless - a perfect killing machine. And now with no soul – he was deadlier than ever.

The men unloaded the many crates of ammunition slowly and with great care storing them almost reverently on shelves that lined one wall of the large garage. They took a number of weapons out of the van and stored the majority of these with the ammo; but they took their own weapons with them into the mansion. Dixon called them all to attention in a low voice as they gathered in the entry alcove; nervous twitching and low conversation confirmed this man was their leader, and they feared him. Dixon ordered them to seek shelter in one of the surrounding mansions and to pick their places well as they would ride out the long cold winter here.

Upon entering the exclusive neighborhood they had found few survivors, and Dixon had made short work of any who resisted. It had been three years since the Great Burning, and there seemed to be fewer and fewer reports of the black monsters in the area, so he wasn't particularly worried about them. His 'weatherman' had predicted the previous cold fronts, and now predicted the first blizzard of the season was on its way. Dixon decided to ride it out in comfort this time in one of these luxurious estates. No one disagreed with him; no one ever disagreed with him. He claimed the largest estate for himself and his seconds-in-command. Guards were posted and the remainder of his men was sent out to scour the other large homes for any and all food and drink.

Hours later Dixon gave orders he was not to be disturbed unless there was an emergency; and it 'damn well better be an emergency'. Others had learned the hard way what constituted an emergency, at the cost of their lives. Dixon grabbed a bottle of Jack Daniels in his powerful hand and walked into the large living room, taking a long swig. He paused at the window that looked out onto the back of the large estate; enjoying the burn as the liquor slid down his throat. A pathway led down a small incline to the abandoned tennis courts and swimming pool. The sun was setting on a cold blue horizon and he watched as its colors played across the dirty algae-ridden pool. He turned around abruptly and looked about as if expecting someone to be standing there. He waited for a few minutes and then slowly walked thru the large rooms of the house, taking a swig from the bottle every now and then.

On the second floor he discovered what appeared to be a private study. The décor was very masculine, dark paneled walls, small bookcase, and a large soft leather couch. An impressive leather chair stood behind a desk so ostentatious, and yet so definitely male, he was drawn to it immediately. He sat himself down in the leather chair and began to go thru some of the desk's drawers. The bottom drawer on his left produced a pearl-handled Colt 45. He leaned back admiring the weapon, *yeah; this is definitely me...* he thought to himself smiling.

He rose and went over to the plush sofa and plopped himself down grabbing a throw pillow and sliding it under his head. He downed the bottle of Jack and slammed it on the rectangular coffee table. Leaning back again, he closed his eyes and let his body go, releasing the tension at last. He cleared his mind of everything, and then as he dozed, he allowed himself to remember.

His mind took him back, back to the cave where he had found her; back to the ultimate joy that had gripped his mind when he made first contact.

In his last battle with the black monsters he had become separated from his unit. They had attacked with such a vengeance that he barely made it to safety. He had run to a ledge and jumped down the side of a mountain, sliding and rolling down a considerable way, striking his head several times on boulders. He ended up at the bottom of a small ravine in a clump of bushes, unconscious and hidden from view; the rest of his team was not so lucky. He remembered coming to and finding nothing but scorched earth and charred bodies all around him. He wandered about trying to find his way back to his unit. He was turned around and the ground was charred beyond recognition. He couldn't travel very far by day, and night travel was out of the question with the monsters in the area. A bad situation quickly got worse and he ended up on his own in the middle the monsters hunting ground.

He had been wandering for several months and came upon a desolate valley; the land was scorched and blackened. He had to be very careful, always locating a place he could hide in nearby in case the bastards showed up. He had finally found a cave in the side of a mountain; it seemed to go on forever. He spotted one of the monsters above and retreated to the back of the cave. He was trapped, so he decided to explore it further when a wrong turn led him to a dead end where he slipped and fell into a large crevasse. He slid down at least a hundred feet before he landed in a puddle of some horrible smelling liquid, which he later discovered was dragon urine. It was very dark, and he couldn't get his bearings. He could see some light down a long pathway, so he quietly headed for it keeping alert to any sounds.

It opened into a large cavern, and the ground was littered with odd shaped orbs. He realized quickly that they were dragon eggs of various sizes – he was in a hatching ground. He quickly backed against a wall and dropped to his knees carefully looking about; there was no movement or sound. He began to move forward slowly when he heard a small child's voice calling out and froze on the spot.

Is anyone there? A small plaintive female voice called, *Please, can you help me?*

A child trapped in here with all these eggs, he thought, probably food for when they hatch.

He looked about frantically searching for any indication of where she could be. His natural instincts kicked in and he made a decision - no way will those beasts feast on this child! He looked about and thought, *where in the hell are you, kid?*

The reply was immediate.

You are somewhere very near; I can feel you close by.

Dixon spun around scanning the ground near him. All he saw was a small gelatinous egg. Going down on one knee he looked closer at it and noted it was honey-colored and appeared to be sparkling in the dim light. For several seconds he seemed spellbound, mesmerized by the dancing lights. He stood up and looked all about the chamber. He became aware that there were several of these colored gelatinous eggs about the floor of the chamber, but none like the one at his feet.

He looked down again at the small egg at his feet and reached out to pick it up. He was hit with a huge electrical shock that knocked him down. He landed flat on his butt, stunned for a moment. Almost immediately his mind was flooded and contact was made.

All the false bravado, all the macho bullshit, the hard outer shell he had erected about himself dissolved away in an instant. It was replaced with an all-encompassing love unlike anything he had ever felt before. He would never be alone again; never know rejection again; he would have a friend who accepted him as he was. Their joining made him happier than he had ever been in his entire life.

{Dixon stirred in his sleep and smiled at the memory.}

The next several months were spent finding a safe place for the little girl to mature. She showed him how to get out of the cave and soon they began a long journey to find a safe haven. If the monsters got wind of her existence, they would surely try to kill her. So he searched for a safe place to hide her while she grew.

Several hundred miles away from the cave he had found her in, Dixon stumbled onto a hidden opening in the side of a small mountain. Burrowing and squeezing into the opening he found himself inside a huge cavern. A landslide, probably from an earthquake, had blocked the entrance. For his purposes, this seemed like a safe place for her. He set up camp in the cavern talking to his charge and telling her all about their safe hideaway. He retrieved small branches and leaves and fashioned them into a nest for the egg. He blocked any openings he found in the cave, the better to keep her safe from prying eyes. He explored the cave and found a pool of water at the back, down a long slope. Feeling safe at last, he set in for the duration of her hibernation.

In the days and weeks that followed the egg began to grow. They spent their days exchanging knowledge. She explained that the full extent of her knowledge would happen at the hatching, when they blended as one. But she gave him the knowledge of the history of her kind. For the first time in his life Dixon felt he was part of something greater than himself; and he was humbled that he had been chosen to be included in it. He told her about himself leaving nothing out, and he felt her acceptance of him as he was, without any reservations. She would teach him a new way to wage war on the devils, she told him, and they would join with others of her kind and put an end to this horror.

And then one morning, as he was bathing in the pool, she called to him to come quick. He dressed hurriedly and as he ran towards the main chamber he heard her egg cracking. He entered the main cavern and saw the shells lying about and looked for her.

She called to him and stepped out into the open light. Dixon stared in awe at her; she was gorgeous, more than he had envisioned. She was honey colored, stood at least 20 feet, and as she lowered her beautiful head to him he beheld her dark brown eyes, and the intelligence beyond them.

I am the Lady Tessa, Warrior Dragon to the First. She began to tell him, you are my savior, my companion, and my friend. I was chosen for you and you were chosen for me. We are to be Riders of Light, in the army of the First. We will rid the land of the monsters that kill and destroy for no other reason than they can.

He felt himself rising in the air and he heard her cool sultry voice calling to him. A flash of bright light suddenly burst from her and they were encased in it. He felt himself changing, and the knowledge began to flow. He was in ecstasy, reveling in the joy of full bonding. And then the bastards burst in.

Dixon lashed out in his sleep at some unseen enemy. “No!” He shouted as tears began to slide down his face.

Screeching and roaring filled his mind as he remembered what took place when they broke in and attacked. Lady Tessa dropped him on the ground, sweeping him aside with her tail to protect him; she spun around and faced her attackers. She fought a terrible battle with the devils; fire flying in all directions. He was thrown out of the cave and rolled down the side of the hill slamming his head against a rock. He could hear the loud roaring from above; it filled his mind just before he blacked out. When he came to all was deathly quiet. He searched in his mind for his friend; but the connection had been severed.

Noooo!

Heart pounding, he ran up the hill to the cave; he found it covered in blood. He searched everywhere and sadly found her lifeless body towards the back of the cave. She had been torn to pieces. Dixon howled like a madman, screaming out his anguish.

He held her lifeless head to his chest rocking back and forth and wailing. He thought he had known pain in his life; but it was nothing compared to the pain of this kind of loss. A dark, black emptiness filled his mind and his heart - his grief so deep. He could not fathom the pain he felt... Dixon went mad.

Days passed and he was barely aware; he would be quiet and reflective one minute, and a raving madman the next. His rages went on and on and in his madness he looked for someone to blame, someone to take vengeance upon. This ‘First’ she spoke of never came to her aid; he abandoned her in her hour of need. Dixon would hunt him down and make him pay.

Eventually, through his strong will, he was able to pull himself together; but he was a changed man. He had one thing on his mind now – revenge! He would find the one responsible for this and destroy him. He would raise an army, an army so large that none would oppose him. He would hunt this First down and do to him what had been done to Dixon. He would kill his rider and watch with hideous glee as the madness overtook him, and then Dixon would kill him.

Days later he gathered his small possessions and left his cave of so much joy and headed out into the wasteland. He wandered about for some weeks until he stumbled across a band of marauders who quickly attacked him. They had no idea who or what they were dealing with.

Dixon ran at them screaming and roaring; all they saw was a madman with wild red eyes. His appearance, wild and disheveled, put them off for a few seconds. He used the time to swiftly take out their leader; then took over the band of cutthroats, killing any who resisted. The majority knew it was better to follow than die but they did so out of fear. He took this small band and went in search of other bands doing the same. As the months went by he slowly began to build up his forces.

“Aargh!” (He screamed in anguish)

Dixon bolted upright in a cold sweat panting deeply. He wiped his eyes and looked around. One of his men had come into the room explaining that he had heard him yelling, and asked if he was okay.

Dixon shot him between the eyes.

“I am now,” he said in a cold dead voice as he watched the red pool slowly form around the man’s shattered skull.

“I am now.”

RETURN

Much had happened since the Great Battle here, and the destruction of NaTas in Peru. The Blue Dragon Clan had returned to the West Coast and immediately began flying up and down the coast proclaiming the land free of the black menace. Slowly the people came out of hiding and began to pick up their lives once again. It was Surfman and Diana who made first contact, hailing a group of surfers. Their laid back attitude provided an easy opening for an introduction, especially after Surfman showed them a new way to 'ride the crest'. His ability to speak the surfer lingo endeared him to them quickly, and soon the general population accepted him and the other Blue Dragons as well. Order was once again restored along what once was the California coastline.

Diana delivered six healthy babies and in true dragon fashion pawned them off on her brothers. These children grew at a rapid pace and were soon communicating with Wolf on a telepathic level. Following an inner instinct, Wolf paired them with six of his telepathic dragons and began training them himself. He watched as they grew, in both body and spirit; studying them and their emerging gifts carefully. The children and dragons ended up picking each other and within a short time were ready for pairing. Two years had passed, but the children had aged rapidly to almost 7 years in body. They informed their father that they were ready for enhancement and told him they wanted him to know before they went to Wolf.

Both the children and their dragons approached Wolf requesting enhancement. Wolf conferred with Big John on this (because he was the children's father), and received a resounding 'yes' to his inquiry. Diana protested at first, but the children all convinced her that it was the best thing for them. She relented and finally agreed with them, it was time for this. So it was that the children were officially joined with their dragons, embracing enhancement with open minds. And the six children of Diana and John, along with their dragons became known as 'The Blue Six Squadron'.

It was then that Wolf was called to Dragons Hill for his evolution to Ancient.

Several days later as they flew over the large mesa those below were not prepared for the startling change in the children. Only Jake had known of the rapid development of Diana's children, and their joining with their dragons. Wolf waited for his clan to land and then he circled and landed in the midst of them.

He proudly called out their names to Jake, rider and dragon alike, as they dismounted: "May I present the Blue Six Squadron: Abby and Akira; Bobby and Bato; Charlie and Catai; Daniel and Drega; Ellie and Entai; and last but certainly not least, Kyra and Okada." Each bowed in respect to Jake and greeted him telepathically.

A deep resounding chuckle erupted from Jake as he shot a huge flame into the air signaling 'Approval'.

You are full of surprises Wolf; I congratulate you!

Daniel and Kate stepped forward and greeted Big John and Diana and bowed to Wolf in respect. Daniel reached out to Big John and taking his forearm in a greeting of equals. *Welcome back to Dragons Hill, it has been a long time since we were all together. Big John, your children are quite a sight, how wonderful for you.*

“You have no idea,” he laughed loudly and the children joined in, “a private joke, Daniel,” he said slapping Daniel on the back.

“No need for telepathy, the children translate all to their brothers.” Turning around John called to his children, “Come over here and meet your Aunt Kate and Uncle Daniel properly.”

The young men and women all turned in unison and laid their hand on their dragon’s head for a moment, turned and joined their father. He introduced them to Kate and Daniel, one at a time. Each exuded an air of confidence and strength; both Daniel and Kate felt it immediately.

Diana smiled brightly, “My children are beautiful, aren’t they?” she said sweetly.

“Yes Diana,” answered Kate, “They are a wonder; but then I would expect nothing less from you.”

Diana laughed childlike and went to her children, “Did I not say that you would like your aunt and uncle? Come, let us go below and meet Sam and the other riders. And perhaps Oreo will come and say hello also.”

Kate noticed that her ‘children’ treated her with great respect and also something else. Their manner and speech was that of a parent to a child.

“Yes Mother, we will go below now and meet the others,” said Bobby. “But we must conduct ourselves as warriors befitting our leader, Wolf.”

“Yes, yes, of course my precious,” said Diana as she slipped her arms in theirs and pulled them along the path leading down.

Daniel, Kate and Big John followed behind them. “As you probably noticed, the young ones take care of Diana. They control her bursts of impulsive behavior, and no, she had no idea. Yet when we fight, they follow her lead; it is a very symbiotic relationship for all involved.”

“Are they that powerful?” asked Daniel in alarm.

“More than you can imagine, Daniel,” answered Big John somberly. “They have a built-in sense of right and wrong that goes far beyond my understanding. Wolf says not worry; they love their mother very much and will do nothing against her will.”

John stopped and cocked his head to the side, listening, he then looked at Kate and Daniel, “The children just informed me that Valotin and Queen Valeria are about to exit the thermals. We should return to the mesa and give them a proper welcome.” They hurried above and joined the other riders.

Valotin and his Queen, Lady Valeria, came out of the thermals and began the long spiral down towards Dragons Hill. It had been a little over two years ago that Valotin had left Dragons Hill to complete his task. He had managed to lure the ancient slayer Seth with the promise of a future, which thereby reinforced his strength of will. Seth was able to resist NaTas's false promises and see thru to the truth; he was able to destroy NaTas and end a thousand years old war thus releasing him from his bondage. The final battle with the forces of NaTas was fought and won by Valotin, Ichor, and Alakar's armies; but a high price was paid for their victory.

Valotin was returning to Dragons Hill to be a part of the installation of another dragon to the status of Ancient. Lady Arian came out of the thermals right behind Valotin. At Jake's personal request she had accompanied them on this journey with her rider Lady Emily and her mate Adam, the winged man. As they slowly spiraled down James and Elizabeth could see their friends from Dragons Hill gathered on the mesa below. James also noted that the Blue Dragon Clan was also present. He called to Lady Arian's riders telepathically.

Adam, you'd better prepare yourself, the Blue Dragons are already here. That means Diana knows you were coming with us, sorry old man, James laughed, I can ask Jake to step in if she gets to be too much.

I'm not the least bit worried about her James; she won't bother me I assure you. He gave Lady Emily a little squeeze, Emily I'm going to take to the air now.

Spreading his magnificent wings, Adam lifted off the back of Lady Arian and flew to her side calling to her politely, Lady Arian, thank you for a lovely ride, it was a fantastic experience!

My dear Adam, she purred to him, I was most happy to give you a ride thru the Thermals. And I understand your need to be in the air again. Look below; all the dragons are staring in envy at your beauty! Lady Arian was a bit prejudiced where Adam was concerned.

She was right about one thing, both dragons and riders below let out a low humming sound as Adam spread his wings and took to the air. He dove and circled above the large mesa waiting for Valotin to land first.

Watching from below Diana was itching to jump on Surfman's back and fly up greet Adam, but she held her position. *No, I will remain here by John's side. I will show respect to Wolf, just as I promised the children I would. I will not embarrass Wolf on this his special day, she thought to herself defiantly.*

She continued to watch with the others; the fact that her children were grouped tightly around her never occurred to Diana.

Valotin circled once and landed with his Queen by his side. Lady Arian landed just behind them. All the riders dismounted and stood by their dragon's right side. All heads and eyes were fixed above as Adam circled once more.

Valotin called to him, *Spread your wings my friend, you have their attention, now come and land beside me.* Adam glided in and landed by Valotin's left side - a place of honor.

Valotin began, *Hail Jake, First of the Ancients; I bring greetings and salutations from Dragons Bay. You know my Queen, Lady Valeria, she lowered her head in respect, and of course our riders James and Elizabeth, both bowed in his direction. Behind me I present the Lady Arian and her rider, Lady Emily. Both bowed in their respective way. And at your personal request, Adam, the winged man, has joined us.* Adam stepped forward and spread his wings wide with great pride as he bowed to Jake with a flourish.

There was an audible gasp from the riders assembled on the mesa, and a deep throaty chuckle from Jake, who roared ‘Approval’ to the astonishment of all.

I bid you all welcome to Dragons Hill. We are pleased that you could come for this august occasion. Now, let us dispense with all the formality, go and enjoy for we are all family here.

With that the riders came forward on both sides. Steve reached Adam first and gave him a big bear hug to the surprise of all. He and Adam had become fast friends during his many visits to Dragons Bay. He picked up Emily and swung her around and gave her the same. Then he took Lady Ashley’s hand and introduced her to them both. She was flabbergasted and tongue tied in front of Adam until he put her at ease by giving her a welcoming hug, and with a wink to Steve, lifted her two feet off the ground. Adam had her beaming when he let her go.

Kate and Daniel welcomed James and Elizabeth warmly and they also paid their respects to Valotin and his Queen. Walking over to Adam and Lady Emily they formally welcomed them to Dragons Hill. Daniel asked Lady Emily to introduce him to her dragon Lady Arian. With great politeness he bowed before her and welcomed her warmly.

Please tell Daniel that I am most pleased at his politeness, she relayed to Lady Emily, and I am honored to be here. Daniel smiled and bowed again and bid her to enjoy her stay and feast on the herd at the feeding grounds, then he took his leave.

“All right everyone lets go below,” Daniel ordered the large group. “Come on, we can all visit in the Great Hall.”

As they began to gather in groups and leave the plateau, Michael came over to Steve with Lady Sally; their eyes pleaded for an introduction to Adam. Steve smiled and called to Adam and Lady Emily.

“Adam, Lady Emily, a moment please,” they came over to them and Steve began, “Adam I believe that you asked me introduce you to Michael and Lady Sally at the first opportunity.” Steve swung his arm wide and bent in a mock bow, “Well, here they are buddy.”

Adam’s eyes got big and he smiled enthusiastically as he marched right up to Michael and grabbed his hand.

“Lady Kate’s grandson, Oh, I am honored to meet you sir,” Adam spread his wings in excitement as he shook Michael’s hand vigorously. “I’ve read all about you in the Dragon Chronicles, and spoke to Master Jeffery himself when he visited us recently. You were the second to enhance, after Lady Kate.”

Both Sally and Michael were taken aback by his obvious admiration of them; and here they were like school kids in awe of him.

Turning he looked down upon Lady Sally and worked his magic on her. “And Lady Sally, you must promise to introduce me to your friend, Oreo. I am so looking forward to meeting her.” Sally was surprised he knew about Oreo, let alone wanted to meet her. “I have heard much from Steve about your wonderful camp.”

Adam turned and reached out his hand to Lady Emily and pulled her to him. “May I present my wife, Lady Emily.” Sally graciously greeted Lady Emily with a hug and an invitation to come by her cave and see their child.

As they made their way to the Great Hall, Lady Sally promised, “Adam, I am sure that Oreo will join us in the Great Hall when we arrive. She is filled with curiosity and has a tendency to check out all the newcomers to our little community during the dinner hour.”

“I look forward to seeing her, and Tabs, and Brutus and Cesar, and the other animals that were enhanced. I read about your Lady Emily’s falcon, Lancelot; I want to meet him too!” he told her excitedly.

Adam checked out the pathway leading down remembering the tales from the Chronicles; *so this is where the battle took place between Oreo and one of the mutant beasts. And she dove off this very path into the midst of them. That must have been one hell of a leap!* They entered the large cavern and Adam looked about in wonder.

Sam had outdone himself preparing a great feast for the day. All the tables were laden with piles of biscuits and honey, ice tea and water, and bowls of steaming veggies. Sam had asked Steve what the birdman ate as he did not want to offend him by preparing anything he would find offensive. Steve told him that Adam was just like him, he just happened to have a pair of wings. As Steve, Adam, and Michael came into the Hall there was a hushed silence. Lady Sally took Lady Emily’s hand and with Lady Ashley leading, they made their way to a table with Adam, Steve and Michael right behind.

James, Elizabeth silently called to her mate, Adam looks a bit unnerved by all this attention.

He’ll be fine my love, he answered her immediately; I believe that he is secretly enjoying it. He’s just worried that Diana will make a scene and embarrass Big John.

Perhaps not, I noticed that she has remained by Big John’s side since they arrived. Elizabeth stole a glance in their direction, but her eyes say she wishes she were over there with them. Oh, here comes Sam for the blessing.

Sam came into the large room and went to the center table where he called everyone to attention and said the blessing. Then he bid them all enjoy the meal as the servers came out with giant platters laden with steaks, pork chops, and barbequed chicken and began to place them on the tables.

Sam began to make his rounds of all the tables and speak a word or two to all the riders. He began with the leaders table and warmly greeted James and Elizabeth, promising James that he had made a special desert for him to enjoy.

As they sat at the table, Adam stared at the large platter of food. "Steve, I haven't seen a feast the likes of this in quite some time." Emily piled his plate high, "I do believe I shall be too heavy to fly if I eat all this!" Adam said in exasperation as everyone laughed.

Sam finally made his way to their table and Steve handled all the introductions. "I certainly hope everything is to your liking young birdman," he told Adam. "And if no one has said it yet," he bellowed, "my God man, your wings are magnificent!"

The whole room erupted into cheers and loud clapping; at last the ice had been broken. Everyone wanted a chance to meet and talk with Adam, but they were also aware that it was just too much attention for him. They knew that Valotin would be at Dragons Hill for at least a week or two and they would have ample time to meet and speak with the famous 'birdman'. So they left him alone to enjoy his meal. And enjoy everyone did, especially the dessert, strawberry shortcake and peach cobbler. The strawberries came from Dragon's Hill own gardens. Growing in the rich earth they were twice their size and sweet beyond compare. James had sent a crate of peaches from Dragons Bay the week before with a special request of Sam for peach cobbler. Seeing it before him now, James couldn't resist and had two helpings of cobbler, much to the surprise and admonishment of Elizabeth.

Conversations broke out all over the Great Hall. At Steve's insistence, Adam began to regale his table with the tale of Diana's visit and the uproar that ensued. They were all laughing so hard that tears were streaming down their faces. As they settled down to the dessert, Oreo took this opportunity to saunter into the Hall and make her way to their table. At one point she stopped and sniffed the air; lowering her head, she crept up behind Adam with her tail high in the air. Lady Sally began to smile knowing what was about to happen. She nudged Steve and he joined her grinning at Adam.

Suddenly Adam stopped in mid sentence as he felt his wings being lightly caressed. He spun around quickly and found himself face to face with the biggest cat he had ever seen. Oreo stared at him for a long moment and then she licked his nose, purring loudly. Adam burst out laughing as did all nearby. Adam pet her large head and began to purr at her himself. He moved to a more open area and knelt down on one knee and called to her. She answered him with a loud purring sound and came over to him nuzzling his face. She stepped back looking at his wings, sniffing. Very slowly, Adam opened his wings to their full spread. There were many "ahs," as the Hall became silent and everyone watched. Curious, Oreo pranced about Adam, sniffing over his wings and purring loudly; then she began rubbing herself against them. After a few minutes she walked completely around Adam and then sat before him staring intently. Finally she threw herself down, and purring loudly began to 'play'.

Lady Sally came to Adam's side apologizing, "Please forgive her, I've never seen her quite like this Adam."

“It’s all right Lady Sally, she’s been telling me all about her life here.” Adam scratched her massive head and slapped her large side lovingly, “She’s really very engaging, and she absolutely loves you and the dragons. By the way, who is Rah?”

“Rah is my companion dragon Adam,” Lady Sally replied, “Jake’s First Wing; why do you ask?”

“She said he is her big brother, I was just wondering who she was referring to.” Adam rose and patted her head and walked back to the table with Lady Sally. “Emily,” he called to his partner, “you wouldn’t believe the things she showed me. She is truly an amazing creature!”

“You can really speak to her?” Sally asked Adam, “Oh, this is wonderful! Rah has been the only one able to communicate with her. I have so wanted to speak to her myself, but I just don’t have the ability.”

“Nonsense!” Adam stood and took Sally’s hand, “Lady Sally you just have to be taught how it is done. Come with me and I will show you.” He called Oreo over and placed Sally’s hand on her head; she immediately began to purr loudly. “You must first forget how you communicate normally. Close your mind to all the sounds and open your inner eye to the pictures that will appear before your closed eyes. They will come very fast, as tho you are flipping thru a picture book,” he illustrated with his hands. “This is how Oreo communicates, she sends pictures and feelings.”

Sally tried and tried, but she was too excited at the possibility of communicating with the great cat, she was getting nowhere fast. She finally gave up in frustration and was about to return to the table when all of a sudden she ‘saw’ a quick flash of her and Oreo running in the field by the horse pens, she felt warm and cozy.

“Oh!” She exclaimed wide-eyed. She quickly sent a picture of her petting Oreo and hugging her. Oreo purred loudly and rubbed against her leg.

“She is pleased that you understand, you must find a quiet place and practice with her,” Adam told a beaming Lady Sally. “She is looking forward to thanking you for her life here.”

Adam returned to the table and turned his attention to Michael. “Michael, do you know why Jake asked me here, is there something he wishes me to do?”

“I have no idea Adam, Jake said nothing to me.” Michael replied.

Adam turned and looked at Steve, who quickly added, “me neither Adam; Jake must have something special in mind for you.”

Daniel stood up at the head table and announced to all, “the ceremony will take place tomorrow morning at dawn. Everyone enjoy the rest of the day, we will all meet at dawn on the high mesa.” Daniel and Kate stood with James and Elizabeth and began to go around the Hall greeting and talking with all the riders. Elizabeth turned to Kate and they discussed the children and the many new changes at Dragons Hill.

“Where are the children Kate? I have really been looking forward to seeing them. They must be toddlers by now,” asked Elizabeth, “I bet they have grown a lot.”

Kate chuckled, “you have no idea Elizabeth. It seems that our children are the new future of our world, and they are all very special. The Dragons are keeping tabs on them while we meet here. I’ll take you to them later.”

“Wonderful, I look forward to it Kate,” Elizabeth answered with great excitement.

A line of sorts had formed around Adam as each of the riders was introduced and had a few words with him. Lady Emily and Lady Sally watched with amusement off to one side.

“I hope you don’t mind Emily, but we are all in awe of his beautiful wings and ability to fly.” Sally told her excitedly.

“Adam tends to cause a stir everywhere he goes,” Lady Emily replied softly, smiling. “It wasn’t so long ago Sally,” she said placing her hand on Sally’s arm, “that he shunned attention of any kind. But all that changed when Lady Arian came into my life.”

“Did she change Adam’s heart?” Sally asked intrigued.

“She gave him a new way of looking at all that had happened; and Jake did the rest. In the process Adam found peace; the physical change was just a bonus. So you see I don’t mind the attention he receives, for I know where his heart lives.” She smiled knowingly.

Big John, Diana, and their children waited patiently for an opening to meet and speak with Adam. As they stood there Kyra moved back and forth restlessly, she did not possess her father’s patience. Checking to make sure no one was looking she sent out a quick ‘flash’ in Adam’s direction. He looked up almost immediately and searched her out (correctly), and then excused himself and made his way over to the group.

Looking directly at Kyra he said, *I received your picture, what can I do for you Kyra?* With her brothers and sisters snickering behind her she turned beet red.

Big John laughed loudly, “Ha! Got you good girl! You should have waited your turn.” Turning to Adam he apologized for his daughter’s rashness; “I’m afraid she’s just like her mother in temperament.”

“It’s quite alright, I planned on coming over after I was freed up.” Turning to Diana and taking her hand Adam quickly added with a smile, “You don’t think I would pass up an opportunity to fly with you again, do you, Diana?”

Diana giggled and winked at Adam, “Only if John-of-my-heart approves; I would give proper honor to Wolf on this, his day.”

“It’s all right Diana; I know you want nothing more than to fly with Adam.” Turning to his children he told them, “All of you, go! Fly with Adam and have a good time!”

All seven ran to the mesa for their dragons. They called ahead and their dragons were ready and waiting for them. Diana took off first and her children followed quickly behind. Adam was waiting for them in the air and they took off at breakneck speed and were soon lost from view.

For 60 minutes Diana and Adam went thru a series of dives and twists and unbelievable close shaves. The children were amazed at the birdman’s abilities, and the fact that he could keep up with Surfman and Diana. When they returned to the mesa, they quickly went below and gathering around their father excitedly described to him the workout Diana put Adam through; Big John laughed loudly at their unabashed enjoyment. Diana returned to Big John’s side smiling brightly and took her place as befitting a Queen.

Adam returned to Lady Emily spent, and they made their way to their cave. He was panting and sweaty after his flight with Diana; she wore him out and he needed a rest.

“She is flawless in the air Emily, never seen anything like it,” he told her, “She has a natural ability that is stunning; she and Surfman work as one; it’s incredible!”

“Well, while you were off flying about the countryside, I was sketching pictures of everyone here in camp. And I’ll have you know, even Oreo herself sat and posed for me!” Emily said triumphantly holding her sketchpad for Adam to see. “You’re not the only one who has a way with animals.”

Adam looked at the sketch of the beautiful cat, and marveled again at the ability of his talented mate. He looked at Emily again and thanked God that he had found her. Then he impulsively scooped her up in his arms and made for the bedroom with a leer on his face laughing all the way.

“My sweet lady, let me show you just what kind of an animal I can be!”

Emily chuckled and held on knowing how much Adam enjoyed spontaneous lovemaking.

Up above on the plateau Jake and Valotin were going over the next day's event when suddenly both dragons chuckled loudly.

Valotin advised Jake, *when Adam gets this way it affects everybody in camp. I'm afraid you are going to have a very busy camp tonight with both humans and dragons!*

Both dragons laughed knowingly.

Just then Master Jeffery left the Riders Hall and made his way across the Mesa waving to them both as he went down the mountain.

Master Jeffery is beside himself with all the preparations. When you get a chance you must read the Dragon Chronicles. He has written of your exploits and all that occurred in the great battle. He has done justice to your accomplishment.

I shall look forward to it Jake, answered the large chocolate dragon. Somber voiced Valotin continued, *Even so, I still think the price was a high one to pay; I truly miss Alakar and his wise counsel quite a bit.*

I understand your pain my friend, but believe me they would pay that price again without hesitation. Jake tried to ease his friend's mind; *I was allowed to see the four of them Valotin, they fly with the Winged Ones. Valotin's eyes grew wide in surprise as Jake continued, ease your mind my friend, they have attained Ascension.*

Ha, it is just like Alakar and Peter, said Valotin with obvious pride, *to go ahead and prepare the way for the rest of us.* Valotin smiled as he remembered his friend.

Suddenly Rah called to them, *my liege, Ichor has just come out of the thermals.*

Thank you Rah; answered Jake, *Valotin my friend, we shall all be together again*

Ichor came out of the Thermals and began to spiral down with his party. He landed with his queen, Lady Isabol by his side; he bowed to Jake in a respectful greeting of equals. Jake immediately noticed the glow about Lady Sarah and a small smile played its way across his face. Jackson dismounted and came to her side solicitously, helping her to dismount.

Ichor chuckled as he saw Jake pick up on the new situation. Jackson and Lady Sarah made their way to Jake and bowed in the traditional manner. Ichor and Valotin exchanged greetings, as did their Queens.

Jake lowered his head to Sarah, *I see your glow Lady Sarah, have you news to tell me?*

There's no fooling you Jake, she answered him smiling, *yes, we have wonderful news! I am pregnant Jake; we are going to have a baby! I never thought that we would ever be so blessed, but we are; oh Jake, we are going to be parents!* Sarah stepped forward and threw her arms around Jake's lowered head and gave him a quick hug, *isn't it fantastic?*

Jake raised his massive head and roared a loud ‘Approval’ and looked at Sarah and Jackson. *I am most pleased for you both at this news. You will make excellent parents; your sons will be strong of character and leaders much admired.*

Sons...? Jackson boomed, eyes wide in surprise as he turned to Sarah, “do you hear Sarah; we’re going to have sons!” He lifted her in his arms and swung her around.

“Jackson, easy, slow down!” She was smiling broadly, her eyes dancing in glee.

Jake chuckled at their open display of affection for each other. *Go, my friends, go and tell the others your good news, they will be most pleased for you both.*

As they walked hand in hand off the plateau Jake called to Kate and Daniel and told them that they were on their way down the mountain. He marveled at the change in Sarah. Jake turned to Ichor, *your rider is most pleased at this change and she shines brightly in her joy.*

Yes Jake and it pleases me greatly to see her so happy, replied Ichor with obvious pride.

Jake continued, *of all the humans we have healed, she was the one who touched my heart. Her sadness and despair at what was done to her, was overwhelming. Yet when I offered to help her, instead of pushing me away, she sought refuge in my mind to keep her sanity. And now, to see her so strong and filled with such joy, my heart soars for her.*

Yes Jake, Ichor replied, my Lady Sarah is filled with happiness. When she came to tell me she could barely get the words out she was so happy. She says her life changed when she met me, and she wanted to share her joy with me first. She has proven to be a most unique human; she has the heart of a dragon. No greater compliment could a dragon give.

How did it go when you returned to Europe? Jake inquired of Ichor.

It was very hard in the beginning, but it was Lady Sarah and her practical way of looking at things that aided me in restoring order. Ichor related how they found and set up their base camp in the Austrian hills. An abandoned castle in the mountains served as a perfect headquarters. It was Sarah and Jackson who insisted we fly about and call out the people. After the battle they weren’t as afraid of us and at Sarah’s coaxing they finally came out and made contact. We have a thriving community and she is well loved by all our people. In Germany, Andre and Anastasia report that the people are emerging also and they are building up a large farming community. The Russians are still a bit leery; it will take some time with them. We have plenty of that now.

Jake listened to Ichor’s report with growing pride in his brother; then he asked, *and Sarah and Jackson are cared for and well liked by their people?*

Ichor chuckled and replied quickly, *when they heard the news of her condition they banded together and would not allow her to toil in the fields with them any longer. They said she must take care now that she is with child. They were most insistent, and Sarah had to finally accept their will. Ichor chuckled at this; she was impossible for a while my brother, but then she found something else to occupy her time.*

He shifted his great weight and continued. *She began a search for a doctor. Finding one proved most difficult, it took her many months but find one she did!* Ichor now chuckled loudly. *Being my Lady Sarah, she reopened an abandoned hospital in the town near our castle headquarters. Several nurses and nurses' aides came forward and we now have a working hospital and clinic for the people. I take great pride in my rider Jake; she is truly a remarkable human being.*

I share your sentiment Ichor, Jake and Ichor roared approval together, she has proved to be a most amazing human. And her children should prove to be just as amazing. It was a good blending between her and Jackson. He keeps her steady and focused, a good thing considering the enormous power she possesses.

Both dragons agreed, and then Ichor informed Jake, *My Queen and I shall take our leave now and visit your feeding grounds, I have been looking forward to the taste of your herd again.* Jake chuckled at this and watched as Ichor and Lady Isabel took off towards the feeding grounds.

Valotin keened a low approval for his brother. *He is a true friend and very good leader Jake. His lands were in terrible disarray. He brought the people together and set order in the land once again. There are still a few dark ones across that large land, but they are dealt with almost as soon as they make themselves known.*

Yes, his task was a great undertaking, Jake said with pride, but he found a way and persevered. Their souls are healing at a fast pace, and I am sure it is due to his and Lady Sarah's tireless efforts to restore peace to the land.

Valotin now turned his attention to Jake, *now my friend, why did you insist that Adam come along? Have you a special task for him?*

Yes Valotin, a very special task. Jake began to explain to his friend, a hundred or so miles from here is a small town that has asked for our help. It seems that they have been loosing some of their cattle. They have taken special care to find and begin breeding cattle again and they can ill afford to lose any of them. This new problem has them baffled. Each week they lose one or two from their herd and they are baffled as to how this is accomplished. They have set traps and they have set guards about; but still they lose one a week. Jake saw the quizzical expression on Valotin's face and then understanding dawned.

Aha! Said Valotin in realization, *a dragon in the area would be too big, easily seen by the thief, Valotin offered, but someone, say a lone flyer, just might be able to find out what is going on.*

Now you begin to understand, Jake lifted his head; Adam's unique ability will allow him to survey the land and get to the bottom of this quickly. Do you think he will accept this task?

I see no reason why not, Jake. He would consider it an honor for you to ask his help in anything. He holds you in very high regard. When I told him that you had personally asked for him to attend he was beside himself with joy. Valotin called Adam to the mesa at his earliest convenience.

How goes the re-education of the people in your area? Are things calming down? Jake asked as a matter of politeness, he already knew the answer.

They are coming along as we expected Jake, Valotin chuckled; *the Shaman has proved to be a treasure of enormous abilities. He is most useful in educating the natives. The black devils had just about decimated the population. On a side note, we found an entire town up in the high mountains in Argentina. The houses, the schools, everything was constructed to imitate a Bavarian village in Germany. Valotin shook his head sadly. James is sure that German refugees built it after WWII. The high command fled to Argentina at the end of the war and it seems they tried to recreate their vision of a new world order.*

How distasteful, said Jake in disgust, *a society built on hate.*

James and Vail found the offices of the local newspaper and found pictures and articles. It seems they had a perfect little Aryan world up there. Valotin shook his massive head; James, Elliott and Vail searched everywhere, but found no one. Lady Hannah sent her dogs and they found many bunkers built into the mountains; but they had all been breached by the black devils. We found no survivors.

Sighing Jake said, *how sad that they would let their hatred go so far. Making a hissing sound he continued; the world is better off without such men.*

Indeed Jake, Valotin answered solemnly, *on a happier note, we moved the group of survivors Enaj sent to us into the village. They were thrilled at the opportunity to settle there. Their leader, Wilhelm made a firm friendship with the Shaman.*

And the natives have proved to be excellent farmers. We have vast fields yielding the finest vegetables and fruits. Valotin continued with his report, Lady Emily took it upon herself to travel to many countries around the world searching for and bringing back various fruit trees and vegetable seeds. They have taken root in the rich fertile soil of our valley and our crops are enormous. We have already sent you several barrels of peaches to enjoy.

I believe that Sam and your James will be the ones who will enjoy the 'fruits' of your labors best. Both Jake and Valotin chuckled at the play on words. Yes, Sam will be most pleased to sample your various crop yields and indulge his culinary abilities.

Adam flew gracefully up over the mesa and landed before Jake. Bowing solemnly he started to greet Jake again but was cut off in mid sentence.

Adam, please, we are all family here. You do me great honor, but you need not go to such polite extremes. Speak to me as if I were one of your friends, such as Seth perhaps.

Really Jake, *I did not want to seem disrespectful. Secretly Adam was glad that he could be himself with Jake. I take it that you have need of my abilities. What may I do for you?*

Adam, my friend, you are correct in your assumption. Let me explain, Jake filled Adam in on what he had just told Valotin.

Adam was silent and thoughtful for some minutes, *how long has this been going on?* Adam inquired.

They say as near as they can remember it started about two months ago, Jake replied. *They are at a loss as to whom or what could be doing this. There are no marauder bands anywhere near their town. Adam, these men have taken great pains to travel across the country and gather as many cattle as they could find. They are painstakingly building up a cattle herd. They can ill afford to lose even one. I should like to contact the leader of the town and bring him here.* Jake called to Steve to report. *I would like for you and I to meet with him and apprise him of our plans; his name is Joe.*

Good idea Jake, I don't want them shooting at me by mistake. Adam also added, *it would also be better for him to see me here. That way he will be better prepared*

Agreed Adam, but this man is not given to fright easily. Jake explained further, *he learned quickly about us and after the Battle for Freedom here, he was the first to ask for an audience. Our first meeting was conducted with great decorum on his part. When we arrived at his town he went thru all the customary Dragon Protocol with ease. He has great intelligence, and he is also very level headed; I think you will like him.*

Steve came onto the plateau and went directly to Jake; *you called for me, Jake?*

Good Steve, I have need of your services. Jake explained what he wanted Steve and Lady Elzbeth to do.

No problem Jake. When do you want me to bring him here? Steve asked.

I have already informed him to expect you tomorrow morning. Jake answered quickly; *it would be best for him to meet Adam here, before he begins his investigation. Tomorrow, after the ceremony would be a good time to go get him. Thank you for your promptness, Steve.*

Turning towards Adam, Jake now lowered his head and asked, *Adam, my dragons have requested a flight with you, that is, if you do not mind.*

I'd be honored Jake. Adam stretched his wings to their full extent. With a devilish grin on his face, he tilted his head to the side and raising his eyebrows asked, *where are they now Jake.*

I thought you would be pleased; Jake chuckled; *look up, behind you Adam.*

Adam turned around and looked above. Twenty dragons were circling high above waiting for him. Adam took off at a dead run and leapt into the air yelling, *Yeeehaaa!* He flew up to the dragons and they proceeded to speed off at a frightening pace towards the West. Adam spotted Surfman trying to hide in the midst of them.

He flew up to him and dared, *“One flight isn't enough for you huh? Try to keep up old man,”* and with that he took off in a blinding dive; the race was on!

Back on the ground Jake marveled at the enthusiasm of the birdman. *Lord, what wonders you create.*

Valotin snorted and added, *I look forward to meeting his children.*

Jake turned quickly and asked, *is that possible Valotin, I mean with Lady Emily?*

Now it was Valotin's turn to chuckle. *It seems, my friend, that all things are possible in this new world of ours. His children will be just the beginning.*

Several hundred miles away, in a small valley lying between two large mountains, Evansville rested quietly. She had at one time been the leading cattle ranch in the Wyoming area. Josh Evans, who owned the ranch, had died in the original attack by the black monsters when he was caught in a fiery attack trying to save his cattle. Joe and Josh went back twenty years as friends; both had been navy seals. Joe came to visit each year to help on the ranch. This year he had brought his whole team with him and they had all leapt into action when the attack began. They managed to save thirty head of cattle by stampeding them into a large cave in the side of a nearby mountain. It was two days before they were able to leave the cave and find out Josh's fate. Joe immediately took over running the ranch and the strength of his personality kept things going. The cave was enlarged and a refuge set up in case the devils came back. Soon Evansville was born; word spread and many were attracted to settle there for safety's sake.

Joe had begun dreaming of the riders and the different colored dragons several years ago. He had gone looking for them, and hiding from their view had watched them training day after day. With their riders on their backs they went thru a series of mock battles. He began to notice there was no actual speech, yet they seemed to be communicating. He guessed correctly that they communicated by telepathy. And then one day a tattered black monster tried to attack them. Joe had watched in amazement as a large brick red dragon dove on the unfortunate monster and turned it to ash in minutes. It was then that he understood what these riders and dragons were attempting to do. When he saw the entire sky filled with them, heading westward, he knew that the battle was about to begin. He gathered up all his people and cattle and headed for the large cave in the nearby mountain. There he and his second in command Stu, had watched in awe as the great beasts battled through the night. After the battle he had waited several weeks before making his move. Following his instincts, he prepared by doing mental exercises every day. When he felt the time was right he took a chance and began to call out with his mind. He was quite pleasantly surprised when Jake answered him on his third attempt. He had taken the initiative and asked for a meeting long before anyone else even worked up the nerve to wave to the riders as they passed overhead. He wanted to make a strong bond of friendship between the two towns; he was thinking of the future.

This evening caught Joe galloping along on his large chestnut mare, Molly, checking on the herd, counting. As he rode along, he took in a long breath and his heightened sense of smell quickly disseminated the different odors in the air. A strong sweet scent coming from the north was probably the wild honeysuckle growing along the ridge of the nearby mountain. There was also a dank musty smell; the prevailing smell of soil and sweat and dung.

Ah the sweet smell of cattle! Joe thought to himself.

Ever since Jake called to request his presence at Dragons Hill the next morning, Joe's mind had been racing. Jake was keeping his promise to look into the matter of cattle disappearances that were occurring with regularity. Joe looked forward to visiting Dragons Hill and hearing what Jake had in mind; and of course there was always a possibility of a meeting with Daniel and Kate. A visit to Dragons Hill, requested by Jake himself, was a practical guarantee that he would retain leadership of Evansville.

Dawn found all the riders and their dragons on the large mesa. The Blue Dragons were lined up on one side with Diana and Sandman in the lead. Jake's Clan and the Dragonriders from Dragons Bay were lined up on the other side. Big John and Wolf were standing in the center, with Jake.

Jake called them to attention and began. *We come together today to raise Wolf to the status of Ancient. His leadership had been sound, and his clan strong. He has demonstrated over and over again his great fighting abilities. Now, he has been singled out by one wiser than me to be given the honor of freeing the Pacific and Asia from the burning devils. In order to accomplish this great feat he must assume the mantle of Ancient.*

Jake now faced Wolf, *John will you please take your rightful seat on Wolf.* Surprise all around, especially with Diana, Big John would be riding Wolf during the transformation! This was unheard of; things were certainly different with the Blues.

Jake now continued in a very somber tone, *I ask you both one time only, do you freely accept this change.* Both nodded and answered yes. *To the skies we go,* ordered Jake and they took off heading high above where Valotin and Ichor were waiting.

The remaining company of dragons now began to keen a loud chant. They continued until there was a blast of bright white light from above signaling that the ceremony had begun, the change was taking place. It would be at least two hours before they returned.

The riders and their dragons began to leave the mesa. Diana, her children, and the Blue Dragons remained where they were. Daniel and James went over to Diana and asked her if she wanted to come below with them. Surprising them with her answer, she declined saying that they would remain until Wolf returned. She explained that they owed Wolf their respect and would honor him by waiting.

"I never would have expected that from her. But she seemed very determined," commented Daniel in disbelief. "Perhaps she's growing up."

James was also surprised; "maybe this is her way of making up for her disobedience in the past. You know, show Wolf and Big John that she knows when it's important to do the right thing."

"You just may be right James," agreed Daniel. Both men hurriedly caught up with the riders and relayed all of this to them as they descended below to the Great Hall.

Steve and Lady Elzbeth disengaged themselves from the group and quietly took off and headed towards Evansville near the Wyoming border. Jake had impressed their destination on Lady Elzbeth's mind. He informed Steve that he had spoken to Joe earlier, and the man would be expecting him. Steve knew that this would be Joe's first visit to Dragons Hill, so he decided to pull out all the stops; Lady Elzbeth was most pleased to join him in his endeavor.

Standing now on the deserted mesa with the Blue Dragons, Diana's mind was racing. Everything was about to change and she knew it. Her time of playing was over. Now she must show Wolf and Big John that she was a Queen; that she was capable of behaving as a true Queen. And it would have to begin now.

"We will remain here until Wolf returns," she told her fellow dragons. "We owe him our respect, and we will honor him by remaining. He will be a great dragon, one of the Ancients. We should be much honored to be of his clan, we have a great task before us." The 21 dragons began a low keened and stood their ground while waiting for his return.

Up above Ichor, Valotin, and Jake were each giving Wolf the knowledge that would sustain him and aid him in the coming months. Valotin gave him all the knowledge and experience he amassed during his fight with the black devil, NaTas; Ichor showed him and Big John where their strengths were, and where best they could use them. Jake showed them both the life force in each and every creature. He showed them the power of positive thinking, caring and love, and also how to spot negativity in others.

As the knowledge flowed both Wolf and Big John were engulfed in a bright yellow light. They began to see their future; how they were to accomplish their task; how they would make contact with Enaj and aid T'kai and B'nal of the sea. How they would contact and join up with the Samurai Clan of Japan; victory was assured them.

Their bodies now began to change. Wolf grew larger, his great body took on more muscle; his wings took on the spikes of a Dragon of War. A long silver stripe appeared down his back and across his forehead. His limbs also began to show the silver markings. He became Wolf, Sixth of the Ancients to return, The Hand of Justice. Big John also became more than he was; his body was finely tuned as his mind received the knowledge. He was much more muscular, younger in appearance, finely chiseled facial features. They became as one mind; true brothers united in a great cause.

Two hours later the word spread over Dragon's Hill that they were returning. As they landed on the large mesa there was an audible intake of breath from Diana; both had been changed. Wolf was strength personified, he carried himself differently somehow, she noted, he seemed almost regal.

Wolf and Big John were very surprised to see the Blue Dragons, with Diana, standing there waiting for them. They were greeted with loud shouts of 'Approval' and all bowed in respect.

Diana quickly realized that even John, the 'man of her heart' was different. She had never seen him look so strong, so regal, and so desirable. She wanted to feel his hands on her body; she wanted to make love with him now. But she knew that this was not the time, nor the place for such action. She would have him to herself later this evening when they all retired.

"Thank you all for waiting for us; we are honored." Wolf bowed his head and Big John nodded also. "Enjoy your day here at Dragon's Hill; visit with your friends. We will return home in the morning; once there I will give you all the details on our mission. We have been given charge of a difficult task."

Lady Elzbeth came out of the heights above Dragons Hill and slowly spiraled down to the plateau. Steve dismounted and waited for Joe. Joe jumped down off of Lady Elzbeth's wing and went round in front of her and bowed respectfully. He thanked her for the opportunity to ride on her to Dragons Hill and also complimented her on her beauty. He received a slight nudge against his arm and a soft keen in return. He was unabashedly delighted. He then turned and walked over to a waiting Jake and bowed.

Jake, thank you for inviting me here, turning he looked about the mesa and beyond to the second larger one, I have always wanted to see Dragons Hill.

Lowering his large head Jake acknowledged him, *Good Afternoon Joe; I thought you would appreciate a visit.* Turning to Steve he asked, *do you have the binoculars over there Steve?* Steve nodded and headed towards Jake. *Joe, would you take a look out towards the West, my dragons should be returning right about now.*

Steve handed the binoculars to Joe, and checked him out as he scanned the skies for the returning dragons. He guessed Joe was in his early forties, at least 6'2" tall, and quite robust in appearance. A thick full head of long black hair with a striking white streak in it pulled back and tied at the nape of his neck gave him a very Mongol-like appearance. His face was that of a man who had fought many battles, and perhaps had seen too much of the other side life; with dark eyes that could bore through to a man's soul. Tan, leathery skin gave him a very rugged appearance. He was well muscled and carried himself with an air of supreme confidence. He was a leader, no doubt about it. Steve liked him; he knew how to cut thru all the bullshit to the heart of a problem.

Joe took the binoculars and held them to his eyes; he saw the large group of dragons headed towards the second mesa. Joe watched as the dragons began landing on the large mesa one by one; their different colors shining brightly in the afternoon sun. He was always secretly in awe of these majestic beasts. Their colors, their tightly muscled bodies, they were magnificent to watch. He envied the riders and their ability to communicate with them, to share that secret bond.

You certainly have a lot of dragons Jake, strong good-looking beasts. They must have really given those black bastards a run for it. Look at them land, they are truly...

He stopped and pulled the glasses away for a moment and then put them back. Looking intently he almost dropped them.

What the hell...is that what I think...? My God- it's a man! Turning towards Jake he yelled excitedly, *He's got wings!* Jake, he said pointing at the mesa, *a flying man – with wings!*

Yes Joe, my secret weapon. Jake lowered his head in front of Joe; *will this be a problem for you?* Jake asked watching him intently.

“Whoa!” For once the tight rigid façade that Joe kept about himself disappeared and revealed for a brief moment the man beneath. “Hot damn that is so cool!” he said grinning, slapping his lifted thigh. Then just as quickly he remembered where he was and took control once again. *A problem, no, not at all, Jake, can I meet him? Who is he? How...?*

Joe sighted Adam thru the binoculars and watched as he headed straight towards the mesa. His face held obvious admiration as he watched the tanned muscular man glide in and land, tucking his wings behind him. Both men stared at each other.

Jake chuckled at Joe's reaction, glad that he had revealed himself. He watched as Adam made his way across the mesa.

Joe came over quickly, extending his hand, "Hi, I'm Joe, glad to meetcha, glad to meetcha! I, uh, I don't fly." Adam looked at him in surprise for a second and then began to laugh. Joe joined him and the two sized each other up quickly as they pumped each other's hand.

Gentlemen, called Jake, your attention please. Joe, may I present Adam, our winged brother from South America. I believe he will be able to find out the cause of your problem. Jake was content that the two men would get along just fine.

So that's what you planned. Very good, yes, yes I believe he will succeed where we failed. He looked at Adam in obvious admiration; no one will harm you or hamper your investigation. I'll keep my people away from the area.

No, no don't do that, interrupted Adam quickly. If you are being watched they will notice no guards, no farmers in the fields and they would be suspicious. Just let me meet the people who care for the herd, who will be in the area and may see me. They should be aware of my presence.

That should be no problem, Joe told him, my people are all trustworthy and not given to fear easily.

I would prefer if they kept my presence to themselves. Adam looked at Jake and then back at Joe, they can't talk about me, not even among themselves. A stray word and the rustlers would be aware of what we are trying to do.

Yes, you're right, can't have that. Joe thought for a moment and then he continued. Okay, after dinner tonight I'll bring them to the barn. When they are all there I'll tell them about you and then bring you in. They're a good bunch and they think very highly of Jake and the other Dragons, so I don't think there will be any problem.

Gentlemen, you seem to know what you have to do. Steve and Lady Elzbeth shall return you this afternoon to your town Joe. Jake's voice now took on a less commanding tone as he said, in the meantime Joe, why don't you join us for lunch; Steve and Adam can show you Dragons Hill. I believe Kate and Daniel will be in the Great Hall. Jake knew that Daniel and Kate were much revered by the townsfolk.

You talked me into it Jake; Joe had a big grin on his face, any chance to speak with Daniel and Lady Kate is not to be missed. Adam, Steve and Joe left the mesa talking about a variety of things.

Jake could see a friendship starting to blossom between the three men.

It would be good for them, Jake thought to himself; a strong friendship forged between these three will lead to future marriages and a blending of the species. This would be a good thing, but first I must find a mate for Joe.

Jake had been working for some time to try and find a mate for Joe, he knew deep inside Joe there was a longing for someone to share his world with; but it was proving to be very difficult until he came across a piece of information.

As they went down the mountain, Steve showed Joe the hatching grounds, and he pointed out the various caves of the riders. He brought him to Adam's quarters and introduced him to Lady Emily. Joe was quite taken with her beauty. Emily was warm and friendly and tried to put him at ease; she needn't have bothered. Joe proved to be quite a charmer of the old school. He soon had Lady Emily mesmerized.

After a bit of chitchat they continued on their way down the mountain and ran smack into Oreo as they came around a corner. Thru Town Criers, Joe had heard the story of the 'Hatching Ground' battle. Without missing a step he knelt down and offered his hand to the great cat.

"You guys never do anything small do you?" Joe jokingly chided Steve and Adam. "So my large beauty, you saved the Queen and her children. I do not doubt that you would be a formidable fighter." Oreo purred and rubbed herself against Joe contently.

"You know your history well Joe," Steve complimented him. Oreo meowed and disengaged herself and continued on her way. Joe turned and followed Oreo with his eyes as she made her way up the mountain.

The afternoon flew by too quickly for Joe. He spent time with Daniel and Kate and got a few ideas from them on updating the security for his town. Before long Adam came and told him that they had to get going. Joe made his goodbyes and he and Adam headed up towards the mesa where Steve and Lady Elzbeth were waiting for them. They were soon airborne with Adam flying alongside them on the trip back to Evansville. He kept in contact with Lady Elzbeth and Joe through Jake.

I'm going to leave you at the outskirts of your town. He told Joe, I want to take in the lay of the land while it is light. I'll wait till dark and then fly to that barn of yours. We can decide a course of action once all your people are together.

Sounds good to me Adam, my people are good men, and they will help in any way they can. Joe envied Adam's flying ability. They may have more information by the time we return.

Later that evening Joe and his small security group met in the barn. Joe explained what Jake had in mind and then told them about Adam. Several replied that nothing would surprise them anymore in this new world. Then Joe went to the back doors of the barn and opened them wide. Adam flew into the barn and Joe closed the door quickly. The men stood there open-mouthed staring at Adam as he landed.

“Hi guys!” Adam said at his cheery best. It took them a minute and then they circled him and questions were flying so fast he couldn’t answer them all. Joe took pity on him and called them all to order.

“Okay you lugs, give the man a break.” Joe couldn’t really blame them. “Adam is here to help us at Jake’s specific request. Now, down to business, is there any more info? Stu, you got anything new?”

A large man stepped forward, “I think they tried again last night Joe, but we had the herd buttoned up tight. They’ll probably try again tonight.” Turning to Adam he asked, “Say there Adam, can you see in the dark?”

“Yes, I have night vision, Stu. Just about where do they concentrate their attack?” Adam asked of the men.

“No set spot; just wherever they can isolate a steer.” Stu answered for them, “they’re real quick; they hit and are gone in minutes.”

“Okay, then lets set up a lone steer for them to grab. Gentlemen, I don’t only want to catch them in the act; I want to follow them and see where they go with the steer. There has to be a reason for them to take one every week, they’re feeding something.” Adam had an idea but declined to say anything just yet. “I’ll know more after tonight.”

The men set about like they did every night, but this time they managed to isolate a steer from the rest of the herd. Adam flew high up and circled the area keeping tabs on the steer. A little after midnight he saw movement near the edge of a stand of trees. He watched as a dark figure stepped out and put a rope around the steer and began to lead it off. He followed for some distance and then when the lone rustler entered a mountainous area he lost him in a small gorge. Adam landed and looked about carefully listening to the sounds of the night. As he was about to take off again he spied a hawk returning to its nest. Adam called to her in a low voice and asked if she could help him. She answered and said that she had heard of the flying man from her kin and would be glad to help him. Adam explained the situation and asked if she knew anything. She replied that something was trapped in the large mountain nearby and that a young boy was seen entering and leaving thru an opening. She showed him where the opening was located and bid him good hunting.

**The minute Adam entered the cave he smell it; ammonia. It meant one thing, dragon urine!
*Jake, can you hear me?***

***Yes Adam, what have you found?* Jake answered immediately.**

I am in a small cave; it slopes downward and appears to open into a larger cavern. Jake, there is a strong odor of dragon urine; there is a dragon inside here somewhere. Adam continued to follow the pathway downward. You better get your guys here on the double. Wait a minute, I hear someone talking. He cautiously moved forward.

Ah come on, you have to eat; I know you're hungry Beau, please don't give up," pleaded a young voice. "Ya got to eat something."

The voice was plaintive, and Adam noted very sad. He eased into the cavern a bit more and looked about. At one time this was a hatching ground of sorts. It appeared to have caved in, or perhaps an earthquake had occurred. Adam stole a quick look around a huge boulder and what he saw chilled him. There was a dragon pinned beneath many large boulders. It was reddish in color, and he believed about three or four months old. The boy was about fifteen or sixteen years old, no doubt his rider. He was lovingly stroking the large beast's head; Adam relayed all of this to Jake.

We are on our way Adam. Jake was alarmed that a dragon could be hurt so and not contact him for help. See if you can make contact Adam, but be extremely careful, the dragon may still be able to flame. From what you say, it sounds as if the boy was never able to take 'first flight', which would account for his appearance. It must have happened right after hatching.

Jake, can't you contact him? Adam wondered why Jake didn't just call to the dragon.

If the dragon were not able to receive full knowledge, which occurs at hatching, then that would explain it. Please be careful Adam. Jake was very concerned, the boy was keeping the dragon from going mad for the time being, but they had to find a way to contact him quickly.

Adam left the cavern and went outside and waited on the ledge above the opening. The boy would have to come out sometime, and he planned on confronting him then. Adam waited about 30 minutes and then decided to do something. He flew to the herd and picked up a small calf and flew it to the opening. The poor thing was bleating piteously. The boy came out to see what was making all the noise and went over to the calf.

Adam flew down and blocked this way into the cave. The boy jumped and his eyes went wide in shock at the sight of Adam. "I'm not here to hurt you. Calm down boy, I'm here to help you and your dragon."

"What, who...no, I won't let you hurt him!" The boy rushed Adam and both fell to the ground wrestling about.

"Listen to me boy, I'm here to help. I don't want to hurt your dragon." Adam pinned the boy to the ground and tried to talk sense to him. But the boy was panic-stricken; all he could see was a strange being coming to hurt his friend. *Jake I need your help!* The boy fought as hard as he could but he was no match for Adam's great strength.

Suddenly four large dragons landed in the small gorge and the boy went ballistic, "Nooo!" There was great fear in his voice.

Kate dismounted, as did Daniel; Valotin landed beside them and James climbed down. Lady Elzbeth and Lady Jennie brought up the rear. Steve and Michael dismounted. Steve had a large duffle bag with him.

Kate and Daniel came over to the boy and tried to calm him down. It took a lot of talking but they finally got the whole story out of the boy.

He had come across the egg by accident and made contact. Fearing discovery he had left the egg in the abandoned hatching ground. The boy was called by his dragon and arrived just as the egg was hatching. There was a large tremor and the walls caved in; followed by a large quake. Many large boulders were shaken loose inside the cavern and trapped the dragon. The boy tried to dig him out, but it was impossible. His dragon was trapped and there was nothing he could do. By the time he was finished with his story the poor lad was crying and begging them not kill his friend.

Kate brought the boy to Jake and after dragon protocol was established Jake's soothing voice managed to calm the boy down. He told the boy that they were going to free his friend and take him back to Dragons Hill where he could heal and grow properly.

"Really, you won't hurt him?" He begged Jake.

***He is our brother Peter; we are here to save him.* Jake told the boy that that he would come along to Dragon Hill also, as he was his rider. Then he asked him to go and prepare his friend and tell him that the First was here to free him.**

The boy ran into the cavern and went to his friend, *Beau, Beau I have great news. The First is here. He said to tell you that he's going to free you.*

***The First is here? Oh Peter, I remember that name; I am finally going to get out of this place.* The despairing dragon began to see a glimmer of hope; at long last he would be free.**

***Jake is sending in some of his riders to look around and see where to place the charges that will free you.* The boy sat down by his dragon's head and called to the riders, "it's okay, you can come in now."**

Daniel and Kate came in first and bowed to the trapped dragon. Kate was aghast at the condition of the poor beast. She relayed all she saw back to Jake. He was thin, very thin, and his color was dimmed. Huge boulders had pinned him from the waist down. One of his wings appeared to be damaged.

Steve surveyed the area and called to Jake, *I believe I can set some charges to blow an opening in the top of the cavern. Your dragons then should be able to dig a large opening and get in there to remove the boulders from around him. Jake, I don't think that he can fly; he's really, really thin.*

Jake told Steve not to worry himself. *We shall care for him and return him to health Steve. But first he must receive the knowledge so that we may communicate. Place your charges and do your best.*

Twenty minutes later there was a loud explosion and a large opening had blown out the entire side of the cavern. Lady Jennie and Lady Elzbeth began to dig out a larger opening.

The boy and his dragon watched with growing anticipation as the opening was widened to reveal two large dragons and Jake standing quietly in the distance, watching. Joe and many of his men showed up and offered their services to help dig the dragon out. They went to work immediately working side by side with the mighty beasts for several hours. The men felt a sense of duty and honor, and bonded with the dragons on this massive task.

It was hard, sweaty, laborious work; but they began to make headway towards the afternoon. They managed to dig out a large opening, big enough for Jake to enter. When it was ready Jake asked everyone to leave the area and wait outside while he spoke to the dragon.

Peter, I want you to relay my words to your dragon, do you understand? Jake asked.

Yes Jake, I shall tell him everything you say, promised the distraught youth.

Jake lowered his head to Peter, *Tell him to look into my eyes; he is to receive the knowledge that was denied him at hatching. Tell him to accept the healing of the First, and then you must leave for a few minutes Peter so I may minister to him.*

Jake reared back and drew in a long deep breath. Peter relayed the message and then scampered out of the cavern and went to the waiting people. Jake took a step forward and lowered his head to the trapped dragon. Eye contact was made for several long minutes. Suddenly a beam of bright white light shot out of Jake's head and entered the trapped beast's head. He roared loudly, and then quieted. His clouded eyes slowly cleared and he began to understand.

Oh, I remember now... you are the First of the Ancients, the Healer. You have saved me! The now aware dragon lowered his head before Jake in respect. *I humbly thank you for my deliverance.*

Jake acknowledged his sign of respect and told him, *it is your rider you must thank. He never gave up hope that someday you would be freed. His devotion to you is unconditional; it is to be admired greatly. Now, do you feel strong enough to attempt an extraction?*

Yes Jake, he quickly replied.

Jake called Valotin over. *This is Valotin, Fourth of the Ancients, your Clan Dragon. It is he who will release you from your prison.* The injured dragon bowed his head in respect to Valotin and was acknowledged.

Valotin came to the dragon's side, *Dragon, I am going to remove the top boulder first, wait till I grab the boulder in the rear; then I want you to push upward with all your strength. Do you understand?*

Yes my liege, he replied, accepting Valotin as his leader, *I will try with all my might.*

Valotin grabbed the enormous boulder in his great claw and rolled it out of the way revealing a large wound on the dragons back. He then grabbed the massive boulder that was pinning him down. With a giant tug he finally dislodged it and the trapped beast pushed upward with all his might. Valotin grabbed his front legs and pulled him out of the hole slowly, finally freeing him from his prison.

Once freed, they were all able to get a good look at the dragon and it was obvious that he was too injured to fly. He was very thin, and his muscles had not been able to build up. His wings were useless until they were healed properly. Valotin and Jake decided that they would carry him to Dragon's Hill themselves.

His rider came running over to him in great joy that he was free, he wrapped his arms around his dragon's large head, *Beau, your free at last! Oh Beau, I knew we would find a way!*

The dragon raised his head slowly, *my wonderful companion, you never gave up hope for me. I am ashamed that I despaired. He nudged his rider gently; you have been a true friend.*

James came to Peter's side, "Peter, come with us, you will ride with me on Valotin. We are taking your friend to Dragons Hill where Jake can heal him properly." James explained to him about dragon etiquette.

Peter bowed and asked for a ride from Valotin as instructed and heard his confident voice in head; *I would be delighted to give such a devoted companion a ride to Dragons Hill. You are very brave Peter and do your dragon proud.* James led an elated Peter around to the side and showed him how to mount the mighty dragon.

Jake called Joe over to him and thanked him personally for coming to the aid of the trapped dragon. He promised a visit to his village, and a search to see if a rider could be found there. Joe thanked him and when he related the news that night to his township, the people were very impressed.

Jake and Valotin positioned themselves on each side of the injured dragon and slowly edged their way under his injured wings. Carefully they lifted him and were soon on their way to Dragons Hill.

Adam flew alongside the strange looking group and engaged the dragon in conversation. He told him all about the healing he had received from Jake and assured him that the same could be done for him. The dragon was filled with hope by the time they arrived at Dragons Hill. As they landed amidst the entire dragon population of Dragons Hill there was a loud roaring chorus of 'welcome' from them all.

Jake then signaled James to take Peter under his wing and teach him what he needed to learn. James immediately took Peter below to eat and rest explaining that he had some things to learn before he could see his dragon again. Master Jeffery was waiting for him when he awoke from his rest and his schooling began.

In the days and weeks that followed he learned the basics of dragon history and was then given a copy of the Dragon Chronicles to read. He was amazed to learn of all that had taken place during the past two years. He had been out of touch all that time wandering thru the mountains and deserts across the land. When Master Jeffery was satisfied that Peter understood all the history of the recent years he brought him to Jake. He would receive his final lessons from Jake himself.

He was brought before him in the Riders Hall where he bowed in respect and then began to thank Jake profusely for all he had done to help his dragon. Jake chuckled at his enthusiasm and put him at ease quickly.

Peter, he began, you must understand now that your dragon was unable to complete the Hatching Ritual properly. He did not even get to tell you his name; yet you call him Beau, why is this?

Peter told him, when I looked at him all I could see was Beau. I don't know why, I can't explain it; I just knew that was his name.

Jake keened 'approval' and told Peter, your dragon is healing very fast now. He has gained weight at our feeding grounds and has acquired the knowledge he was denied at hatching from his clan dragon, Valotin. He will be ready to properly greet you in a few days time. Has Master Jeffery explained to you the process of enhancement?

Peter nodded, yes Jake, he told me all about the changes that would take place.

Good. Your dragon has much love for you, and he looks forward to your next meeting. I suggest that you rest and eat well for the next few days. You will need all your strength for this meeting. Jake lowered his head to Peter, Seek out James and Elizabeth, for they will be your clan leaders when you and your dragon become one. James will tell you of your new home and the wonders there. Adam, the flying man will help you also. I will call you when your dragon is ready.

Thank you Jake, I shall do my best. Peter left the hall feeling very positive about the future.

He went below and sought out James and Elizabeth. Later, he saw Adam fly down to the horse pen and followed. Adam saw him coming and waited for him.

"Peter, how is it going?" he asked him cheerfully.

"Adam," he waved as he ran down the pathway to him, "it's all so unbelievable! There's so much to learn and remember. I just hope I don't disappoint Beau."

"Ah don't worry about it, Peter, once enhancement takes place you'll be just fine. The knowledge will come easily when you need it," he reassured him. "You have been informed about the physical change, haven't you?" Peter shook his head, "you'll be at your best, kid."

James came down the path and called to Peter, "there you are; I've been looking for you. We have a little trip to take. You, young man, need new clothes; your present garb is in tatters. Come along, we need to go to town, Lady Elizabeth is waiting for us above."

Peter spent the next few days with James and Lady Elizabeth and Vail and Lady Amanda in the town. A true friendship developed between them. They told him all about his new home, Dragons Bay and the people there. Peter was filled with excitement at the prospect of going there and starting his new life with his dragon. He spent many hours with Adam and Emily and learned about her garden and all the birds in his new home. He was amazed to learn that Adam spoke to the birds and that they knew all about what had happened.

Early in the morning of their fourth day at the town, Jake called them back to Dragons Hill. Jake was waiting for them when they landed on the mesa. He studied Peter for a moment and then told him that his dragon was ready.

It is time for your joining with your dragon. Go to the Riders Hall and greet your companion.

Peter looked at James and then at Jake grinning broadly. "Oh yes!"

Peter ran to the Riders Hall with all speed. He entered very excited and waited for a moment to allow his eyes to adjust to the dim light inside the Riders Hall. He heard a movement to his left and turned his head. What he saw took his breath away. There was Beau, standing at his full height of 22 feet. He was magnificent, his body, and legs had filled out, and his powerful muscles were built up again. His color was a deep rich red brick; and Peter thought he had never seen such a magnificent dragon in all his life. Beau rose up and spread his wings; leaning forward he came down before Peter and laid his head at his feet.

I am Beau, a Dragon of Light, and member of the Clan of Valotin, Fourth of the Ancients. You are my companion, my rider, and he who saved me. You were chosen for me, and I for you. We are here to serve and protect man.

Beau raised his head till he was at eye level with Peter, a bright white light shot out of him and engulfed Peter. Peter began to feel himself rise up in the air. Beau wrapped his wings about him and he slowly began to turn. He could feel a charge of electricity going thru his body. He was engulfed in a bright blue light, which slowly turned to a green color. Knowledge began to flow into Peter's brain at a lightening speed. He began to see all sorts of people, people he would soon meet, people in his future, and then he saw a dark haired woman; she looked very familiar somehow. *Behold she who will be your mate.* Peter was astonished and pleased at this news. He learned his and his dragon's task on this earth. Great knowledge flowed for almost an hour.

When his dragon placed him on the ground Peter was completely changed. He was about 6'2" tall and well muscled. His face was that of a man, well chiseled features, long auburn hair, and deep brown eyes. He had a well built chest and trim waist. His features would be considered very attractive to the fairer sex. Peter dressed quickly and together they left the Riders Hall and went to the assembled riders on the mesa.

There was a great roar of 'Approval' from Jake and Valotin. The riders were amazed at the changes in both Peter, and Beau. Valotin stepped forward with James at his side and officially welcomed Beau and Peter into his Clan. They would leave in one week and return to Dragons Bay.

Four days later a festive gathering was planned and Jake personally invited Joe to attend, to say thank you for his help in rescuing Beau. Joe quickly accepted knowing that most towns prized such requests. Jake was singling out him and his town and he was smart enough to realize that this friendship would insure his continued leadership of Evansville. He had plans for his town, and their cattle business. He also knew that in all probability he would be asked to spend the night at Dragons Hill. Joe intended to use this opportunity to gather as much information about the surrounding towns as possible. He called a meeting of Evansville's town leaders and related the news of Jake's invitation. They were very impressed that the great dragon had singled out Joe. Not wanting them to misunderstand, he quickly explained how this honor could help their town. Joe left his second-in-command, Stuart, in charge. He knew he could count on Stu to protect Evansville. He left instructions for any incoming inquiries about their herd.

When Steve and Lady Elzbeth arrived to pick him up he was already waiting for them on the large plain behind the town with three of his fellow leaders. There was a sharp intake of breath as Lady Elzbeth banked and glided in to a perfect landing. Steve jumped down and greeted him warmly, impressing his fellow townsmen. Joe gave them all a knowing look, shook hands with several of them, and then turned to face Lady Elzbeth. He bowed before her in grand style and requested her indulgence in giving him a ride; he also complimented her. She frightened the three townsmen momentarily when she roared 'approval' loudly. Lowering her large head she gently nudged Jose almost knocking him over; Joe laughed loudly putting them at ease. His fellow townsmen were very impressed at the open display of affection from the large dragon; the exact effect that Joe had hoped for. He smiled as he climbed on behind Steve, waved good-bye, and they were soon in the air.

Stu chuckled inwardly; *you devil you Joe, ever the showman!* He watched as they rose to the heights and flew off towards Dragons Hill.

Up above Steve was well aware of what Joe had done. "Good to see you again Joe, I take it you were looking to impress your fellow partners with your familiarity with Lady Elzbeth," Steve asked jokingly. Joe laughed heartily as Steve continued, "I think you have increased your value to them and insured your status as their leader. You are a crafty devil!" Both men laughed.

"You caught me red-handed Steve, I intend to see to it that Evansville becomes a strong cattle town. If everything goes well, we'll have a good-sized herd by next spring. We'll be able to start trading with our fellow towns."

And what of Dragons Hill," Steve asked?

"You guys will always have first call; that goes without saying. We wouldn't be here doing all this if it hadn't been for you," he sighed loudly and looked about, "God I love flying these noble creatures!"

Jake also invited a woman from the neighboring town of Sandstone who had done a great service for the dragons - unknown to them till quite recently. During the battle with the black devils Jake and dragons passed over her town. She had kept the men of her town from firing on the dragons with a great wooden spear they had constructed. She had seen them in a dream and was informed about what they were doing; she was asked to keep the men from firing at all costs. As they began to pass by she recognized them from her dreams and she went into action. She ended up physically fighting with the men of her town; it had taken every ounce of her courage to stand up to the town leaders, but she knew she was right. She stood there defiantly, black eye and all, but she held her ground. They would not fire on these dragons!

It was only recently that Jake learned of this, and he had sent Michael and Lady Jennie to the town with an invitation for the woman to come to Dragons Hill to be personally thanked by him. The town leaders could hardly refuse so great an honor. The woman secretly didn't care what they thought; she was thrilled and agreed quickly without even consulting them. She had dreamt the exact thing and more. She knew it was important for her to go to Dragons Hill.

Michael and Lady Jennie returned to pick her up the next day. She waited excitedly for them to arrive, and was thrilled when she saw them fly in and land. Taking great pains to put on a show for the town leaders, Michael greeted her with pomp and ceremony. Following Michael's instructions she greeted Lady Jennie and asked for a ride. Lady Jennie said she would consider it an honor since she had saved their lives by her actions. She mounted the beautiful creamy brown dragon and they were soon on their way.

Kate and Daniel, at the behest of Jake, were waiting on the mesa to greet her when she arrived. As they landed and dismounted, she immediately went to Lady Jennie as instructed by Michael, and bowed and thanked the beautiful dragon for the thrilling ride. She also told her she had never met such a beautiful and gracious dragon. She received a gentle 'nudge' from Lady Jennie, which thrilled her to no end. Michael then led her to a waiting Daniel and Kate.

Kate stepped forward smiling and introduced herself. The woman was speechless for a moment and then recovered. With a short curtsy she introduced herself.

"My name is Victoria; Vicky for short. From the town of Sandstone, I...um...uh...oh dear! I am so honored to be here Lady Kate, and to meet you! I've heard all about you!"

Smiling in understanding, Kate introduced Daniel and watched as the woman blushed deeply when Daniel took her hand and kissed it.

"Victoria," Daniel said softly, "Jake has asked for a special audience. Dragons consider a selfless act such as yours to be an indication of a high spirit. He wishes to thank you personally, would that be alright with you?"

Vicky's eyes flew wide and she stammered for a moment, "mm...meet Jake? Oh yes, yes of course!" She was breathless; this was a dream of every person who had ever heard the Dragon Chronicles from the Town Criers. "I... I would be honored!"

“Well then, let’s go and see him.” Kate came to her side and took her arm and led her to the Riders Hall. Vicky’s mind was racing with excitement. She was amazed that these people of legend were walking right beside her.

Daniel began speaking and linked his arm with hers, “From what Jake tells me, you were very brave. I understand that you actually had to fight with two of the town leaders. That took a great deal of courage. What made you do it?”

By now Victoria had pulled herself together. “Lady Kate, Daniel, I had dreamt of the dragons passing over to battle with the black monsters. I can’t explain it but I just knew that what the dream said was true. I had to keep them from firing that weapon. I knew the dragons overhead were good, like I said, I can’t explain it.”

They arrived at the Riders Hall and went inside. Jeffery was waiting for her in the center of the cave, she was brought to him and proper introductions were made.

He greeted her warmly. “My dear Victoria, you must tell me all about what happened that day.” He continued as he explained his love of history; all the while gentle leading her further into the cave. “I want to put everything down in the Dragon Chronicles in the proper sequence. Ah, but first things first. Tell me, do you know anything of dragon etiquette and procedures my dear?”

“Oh yes Master Jeffery,” she answered quickly wanting to impress him, “from the Town Criers. They speak of many things concerning the dragons, and one of them is proper behavior and greetings. I make sure I am always there when they come to town. I have listened and remembered everything they said.”

“Good, good; then you understand what I am about to ask.” Jeffery faced her and taking her hands in his he looked her straight in the eye and asked, “Do you give permission of your own free will for Jake to speak with you, in your mind? Dragons communicate by telepathy and he cannot speak with you without your permission.” Jeffery explained.

Victoria’s heart was racing with expectation, she looked towards Kate, who smiled and nodded. Breathlessly she answered, “yes, oh yes I do!”

Then let us meet at last Lady Victoria, Jake cooed to her softly.

Vicky quickly spun around and looked into the face of Jake himself. “Oh!” She jumped and stepped back. Quickly recovering, she took in the full view of Jake and his enormous body. She knew the dragons were big, but she wasn’t prepared for Jake’s commanding presence. His body was huge, black yes, but with a silver sheen about it. And his huge head had silver on the ridges around his eyes with a bit of purple in it. And those eyes! The intelligence she saw in his eyes brought the reality of the situation clearly into focus.

Oh, you are the most beautiful creature I have ever seen! She was grinning largely, eyes wide in awe. I, I didn’t expect you to be so fantastic. Thank you so much for all you did! She spun around arms outstretched, all of you, all of you and the dragons, thank you...you saved us all!

Jake could see that she was speaking from a pure heart and spirit. *How wise of you my dear young woman to understand so much. Jake now praised her, and you saved us when we were on our way to do battle. We had no knowledge of your large weapon. It would have injured many of our riders. But you fought to protect us. We are in your debt.*

Jake now rose to his full height and roared ‘Approval’ loudly. Vicky jumped as the sound reverberated around the large Hall and the other dragons took up the call of praise. He lowered his head to Victoria, *we thank you dear lady for your courage and foresight. We dragons prize that kind of courage. If we can be of service to you in any way, Lady Victoria, please let us know. We would consider it an honor.*

Tears were running down Victoria’s face, *you have given me such honor sir. It is more than enough, thank you so very much.*

Jake chuckled, *Go now and enjoy the feast that has been prepared. We honor several people this night, all of which, like you, have served without being asked. Jake now emphasized, you must meet those we honor this night, Lady Victoria.*

Kate and Daniel came over to her and led her out of the Hall. She was still a little beside herself at all that had just happened.

“Why don’t you come with me Lady Victoria; you can rest and calm yourself,” said Kate sweetly. “I know you must be filled with questions and the like.”

Victoria nodded and followed Kate down the mountain scarcely aware of her surroundings. Kate led her into her sitting room and put on a pot of tea for them both. Oreo came out of the back room; now that Kate had returned, her babysitting duties were over. She walked straight over to Victoria and rubbed herself against her purring loudly. Her presence snapped Victoria out of her bewilderment and brought her back to her surroundings.

“How beautiful you are my sweet,” Victoria scratched Oreo’s head and ran her fingers thru her silky coat. “My, my, you are an attention-getter! I should love for you to meet my friends Duke and Samson,” she said as she kissed her large head. Oreo purred even louder.

Kate watched as she doted on the large feline. She seemed nice, genuinely thrilled at meeting Jake, a very down-to-earth type person. She was an attractive woman, about 5’7”, tall and lithesome, but very fit. Her legs were taut and muscular, as were her tanned arms. Her hands were rough and callused; she was no stranger to hard work. Her face was attractive, angular in shape with a pair of hazel-gray eyes that were quite striking; all framed by curly short pitch-black hair. She guessed she was in her early thirties. She hoped that Jake’s little plan worked. She could tell that this was a strong woman; and she had a feeling that Joe would like his women strong. *Oh Jake, matchmaking is so much fun!*

Kate brought over a tray with a steaming teapot and two cups on it. “She loves the attention Vicky, may I call you Vicky? She’s a great babysitter; little Billy loves to play with her.” Both women sat and relaxed, sipping their tea.

“How do you do it Lady Kate? How do you handle all this,” Victoria waved her hand about indicating Dragons Hill, “and remain so calm and in control? You are amazing!”

“Daniel and I share leadership of Dragons Hill,” she answered sweetly, “and Jake takes care of the rest. Are you married Vicky, do you have a family in Sandstone?”

“No Kate, I lost my family in the original burning,” she answered softly, “actually, I hadn’t even thought about it till quite recently.” Vicky squirmed around in her seat, as if deciding something.

“Kate, I’ve ... oh hell! Look, I’ve been having the strangest dreams lately; and there is this man in them. He’s so familiar and yet I’ve never seen him before.” She looked at Kate with a furrowed brow, “I think that maybe it might be wishful thinking. But these dreams are so real! Oh I don’t know, maybe it’s nothing.”

Smiling Kate told her quickly, “Vicky, dreams like that just mean that there is someone out there for you. We have found to just accept the dreams and in due time their meaning is revealed.” Kate got up and took their cups and placed them on the bureau behind her. “Now come with me down to the Hall. Everyone will be there this evening; I understand that we will even have music, which means there will be dancing. Daniel and I love to dance. This is a time for celebration; you’ll have a good time, Vicky.”

Vicky rose smiling, “oh that really sounds wonderful, I can’t remember when I last heard music.” Together they both left the cave and headed down to the Hall.

Oh this is so wonderful; I don’t ever want it to end, Vicky thought to herself, and Kate is so down to earth. This is where I want to live.

Below in the Hall, Joe was in deep conversation with Daniel and Steve and Jerry. “Jerry, I hear that there is nothing you can’t fix. Well, if you promise to come to Evansville, I’ll give you a real test of your skills. Our water plant refuses to come on line. We are having a devil of a time with it and since none of us are engineers, we seem to be making the problem worse.”

“Sounds interesting Joe, I have commitments right now, but two days from now I am free. I’ll come over then; say, how about I bring Steve with me? If we can’t fix your problem, no one can!” Jerry boasted loudly.

Peter came into the Hall with Michael and Andrew, “son of a gun,” said Joe excitedly. “Is that Peter? Damn, what a change in his appearance!” Joe was continuously amazed by the strange mystical powers of the dragons. He considered himself blessed to be in such company.

They were all laughing when Kate and Vicky walked into the Hall. Joe’s back was facing them and Daniel quickly took over the conversation and had Joe enthralled with some of the tales of their adventures. Kate took Vicky to the back of the room and introduced her to Sam and Lucy. Then they went to a table where the female riders were gathered. Introductions were made all around.

Lady Ashley caught Vicky's interest right away. "Lady Ashley, may I ask how many horses you have here?"

Ashley smiled, "There are three geldings, and five mares. I only wish we had a stallion." She quickly added, "Then we could breed the mares."

"I may be able to help you in that area Lady Ashley," Vicky said excitedly.

"Please Vicky," Ashley said sweetly, "just call me Ashley, we're all family here."

"Thank you," she said quickly smiling, "I may be able to help your cause. I have a stallion in Sandstone; he's almost 2 years old, and in dire need of a few mares. Maybe we could help each other out?"

"Oh, I think I am being set up; but you know what," she laughed, "I don't care if it means I can breed those mares! Yes, we can help each other out. And, if he gets all the mares pregnant," she held up her finger, "if, mind you; you may have your choice of one of the folds. Agreed?"

"Agreed," both women shook hands on the deal.

"You have no idea what this will mean for us." Vicky explained to Ashley, "we have three geldings, but no mares. I found the stallion when he was just a baby, nursed him back to health in hopes of increasing our herd. This is wonderful!"

Kate thought about how Oreo took to her so quickly, this would explain it. She had a natural affinity for animals. "Was that one of the friends you mentioned to Oreo, Vicky?"

"Yes Lady Kate," she replied smiling, "I named the stallion Samson; he's a beautiful copper color, stands about 15 feet high. He's quite beautiful and we're the best of friends."

"And the other," Kate asked, "is he a horse too?"

"No, no," she chuckled and said flatly, "Duke is a grey wolf." Both Ashley and Kate looked at each other in surprise. "Apparently Samson and Duke's mothers had serious run-ins with the black dragons; they were both killed protecting their young. I couldn't leave either of them to die; they were so small and helpless. So I took them both with me and raised them together; they're the best of friends and fiercely loyal to me. Which comes in handy every now and then, I don't mind telling you, when unwanted advances come my way."

Both Kate and Ashley looked at each other and laughed. "I bet that's a sight to see!" All three women chuckled heartily.

Vicky was feeling a strong kinship with these women. They were like her; strong, take charge types. Not a bunch of whiney, fearful creatures afraid of their shadows. She almost hated the thought of having to return to Sandstone. She was the only one who thought for herself; made decisions without consulting the men; and was not afraid to speak her mind. She saw no reason to constantly consult them about every move she made.

The women there deferred to the men on every thing. In the beginning when she returned with the horse she had to fight long and hard with them over the care and feeding of the animal. And their fear and prejudice of the wolf was still on going. It had gotten so bad that she had moved to the outskirts of the town to avoid them, and kept mostly to herself. Needless to say, the women of Sandstone were not overly friendly with her. But when something happened, when they were threatened with something that affected them; well now, it was she they came to for help.

Kate spied Sam and he nodded to her. She got up and announced that the tables had to be moved and set up for the feast. Everyone pitched in making the tables in a large arc and leaving a large open space in the center of the floor.

“For dancing later on,” Kate explained with a wink.

People began to arrive for the celebration feast and take their places in the great Hall. Kate and Daniel took their seats at the head table. Kate called Vicky to come and sit beside her, a place of honor. Peter, enjoying his new status as dragon-rider, sat with James and Vail at the second table. The Hall was filling up with many people. Vicky was chatting with Kate when she saw Joe make his way over to the table and sit down next to Daniel. Vicky stopped and stared at the large man as he sat down.

A smile began to form on her face and she whispered to Kate, “who is that man? He seems very familiar... oh my gosh! Kate, he’s the man in my dreams!”

“Are you sure Vicky,” Kate asked feigning surprise.

“Oh yes, I’m sure; those eyes, that face, and his swagger is not to be forgotten.” she watched as he took his place beside Daniel. “Who is he Kate; where does he come from?”

Daniel leaned forward and smiled at Vicky in his best charming manner, “Lady Victoria, have you met Joe?”

Vicky stared at Joe, eyes wide in surprise. Joe leaned forward and smiled, and then he too stared at her in surprise.

Daniel continued, “Joe’s from a neighboring town, Evansville. He did us a great service, like you; and we are honoring him also this evening.” Daniel made the introductions.

Vicky recovered quickly and replied, “I’m pleased to meet you, Joe. Is it possible that we met before somewhere; perhaps before the burning?”

“My dear lady,” purred Joe in a deep voice standing, “if I had met you before, I can assure you that I would have remembered.” Joe bowed slightly.

Vicky blushed and laughed out loud eyes flashing, “Well now, you’ve certainly got a real good opening line there!”

Joe liked the sound of her laugh. “Very good, I can see you are no wallflower madam, not afraid to speak up for yourself. This new world of ours needs strong women like you.”

“Your flattery does you well sir, I am sure that your wife is just as strong,” Vicky replied brusquely.

“Ah, sorry to say I am married only to my work at present.” Joe looked to see if she would take the bait.

Kate quickly interrupted, “Ah here’s Sam with the food.” She stood and loudly urged everyone, “please everyone, take your seats for the Blessing.”

Sam led the large group in a prayer of thanksgiving and called for the servers to bring in the food. Tables were soon filled with large platters of chicken, pork chops, and steaks. There were steaming bowls of mashed potatoes, corn on the cob, and green beans. Of course biscuits and honey flowed, being scooped up as fast as they reached the tables. Great pitchers of water and ice tea were placed on the tables for everyone.

Vicky had not seen a table laden with food like this in a very long time. Times had been very lean in Sandstone, and this was almost too much to take in. She smiled and shook her head at Kate, “Lady Kate, this feast is fantastic! I may have to be rolled away from the table.”

Kate chuckled, “Oh don’t worry, when we start dancing we’ll burn off every calorie.”

Kate kept pace with the interaction between Vicky and Joe. She noticed that he sneaked looks her every chance he got; he was definitely curious. And Vicky kept pace with him; both were definitely interested in each other. *Jake?*

Yes my friend, you called?

Kate filled Jake in on the mutual attraction of Joe and Vicky for each other. *Jake when you get it right, you really get it right. I can already see the two of them plotting to see each other again.*

Good, good. Their pairing would produce a strong line, they are both very strong willed. With Lady Victoria’s plans to breed horses, and Joe’s breeding plans for his herd, I would say that the future is looking good. Jake chuckled; I shall leave you to your schemes Lady Kate.

When the meal was finished the tables were quickly cleared, and Vicky jumped right in helping where she could. The tables were moved back and the chairs placed around the room. Several of the young men went to the alcove and returned with guitars, and a fiddle, and one man even had a saxophone. Music began to fill the Great Hall.

Many couples took to the dance floor and began to dance; Vicky was enjoying watching them. Kate and Daniel danced and shouted, and everyone joined in. When they were finished a slow Waltz began, and Daniel came to Vicky and asked her to dance. She accepted quickly, she loved Waltzes.

Kate asked Joe to the floor also. He was every bit the gentleman, and took Kate in his arms and swung her around the dance floor in time to the music. He was light on his feet, surprising for so large a man.

Halfway thru the dance, Daniel came by and switched partners and whisked Kate away before anyone protested. Joe took Vicky in his arms and continued dancing without missing a step. She was thoroughly enjoying herself, moving around the dance floor as fast as Joe could swing her. He enjoyed her unabashed enthusiasm.

The band began to pick up the pace and go faster; Joe kept time with them and increased his steps gaily swinging Vicky around the floor. Vicky threw her head back and laughed loudly as Joe swung her around; it had a very profound effect on Joe. He decided then and there that he must get to know this woman; she was full of life, and very appealing.

Couples began to drop out and pretty soon there were just three of them on the floor. There were loud shouts, and the people began clapping their hands and stomping their feet in time to the music. They danced till the music stopped and then everyone clapped and shouted loudly.

“Whew, that was amazing woman!” Joe shouted as he looked at her grinning, “I couldn’t believe we kept up with them. I could use a cold drink, would you care for something?”

“Anything cold would be greatly appreciated,” Vicky told him breathlessly.

They sat out the next dance and talked about nothing in particular. Then Joe asked her where she was from, what town. She told him and quickly changed the subject to him; she asked him what his town was like.

“Evansville, it’s just a bit west of Dragons Hill. It was originally a cattle ranch. After the burning, as people started to come in, we sort of began building houses around the main ranch house and before we knew it - it became a town. The original owner, Josh Evans, had been my friend for years; he was killed, like so many others, and I named the town for him and his ranch. We’ve started to breed cattle again, and hope to have a good sized herd this spring.” He stopped suddenly, “sorry, I don’t mean to bore you with all this...”

“Oh you’re not boring me, it’s very interesting,” she said looking deep into his eyes. “I have found that since the ‘Burning’, everything has changed. It’s good to see that some people are trying to begin anew.” Her brow furrowed suddenly and she continued with an edge to her voice, “In Sandstone they scoff at any attempt to improve. To begin a new project of any kind, you have to get the permission of the town leaders. I have to fight the fools on everything. I have a stallion, raised it myself from a young colt. I thought it would be a good idea to breed him with the mares here at Dragons Hill. They wouldn’t hear of it, ‘too dangerous’,” she said imitating them, “and ‘not feasible’ was what they said. They weren’t interested until I told them that breeding Samson with the mares at Dragons Hill would put us in good favor with the dragon riders.” She shook her head, “they’re a pack of fools; and something even worse - a bunch of scared rabbits. My worst fear is that someday someone would come in and take over the place right under their noses.” She looked at him and said, “I just may move to your town!”

Joe smiled at the possibility of her being close, “you would be most welcome I can assure you. We prize people with new ideas and the get-up-and-go to get things done.”

She smiled and grabbing his hand, pulled him on the dance floor again. “Again!” was all she said and Joe slipped his arm around her waist and twirled her about the floor, all the while enjoying her laughter and the feel of her in his arms.

“Daniel my love, I believe he is smitten,” Kate whispered to her mate across the room. They both watched as the couple danced about the floor.

“He may be, but I am not so sure about her.” Daniel watched them for a bit and then grinning, he grabbed Kate and they were quickly off across the floor.

The music played on late into the night much to the delight of the dragons on the mesa above. Dragons, who enjoyed music very much, participated thru their ‘link’ with their companions. Dance was a new ‘feeling’ to them and they found the heightened response of their riders when holding a partner, to be fascinating. They also enjoyed the sounds the saxophone made and listened to the melodious tunes with great pleasure.

Little by little couples began to leave the Hall. Kate and Daniel walked Vicky and Joe to the temporary ‘guest’ quarters on the side of the mountain. They made plans to visit Evansville in the near future, said ‘good-night’, and left them standing there.

Vicky didn’t want the evening to end so soon; she wanted to talk more with this strong and attentive man. Quickly she asked, “Are you tired Joe, or wide awake like me?”

“Wide awake, couldn’t sleep now for anything,” he quickly answered her, “Let’s go for a walk, what do you say?”

He held out his hand hoping she would take it. Vicky quickly took Joe’s arm and they started down the mountain. They slowly walked the camp making comments here and there. Vicky knew the path up ahead led to the horse pen and she really wanted to take a look at the mares.

“Joe,” she said tugging him towards the path “let’s go this way, down to the horse pens.” He let her have her way and they were soon at the pens. She sat on the top log of the pen for a bit, studying the horses. Joe sat there admiring her, he could tell she was thinking and planning.

She’s rather attractive, he thought, pretty facial features. Been a while since I wanted to touch a woman’s hair, but I’d love to run my fingers thru hers. She seems like one hell of a woman, and she’s got a good head on her shoulders. She isn’t afraid of hard work either. And he guessed correctly that she had been married before the ‘burning’, probably had a family too.

She looked at him and winked as she boosted herself off the railing and jumped down into the pen. She began to speak to the horses in a soothing, gentle tone all the while brushing them as she moved about the large pen completely unafraid.

They were skittish at first, but they soon quieted as her soothing voice mesmerized them. Joe recognized her ability immediately; she was a natural. Pretty soon the large paint came over and 'nudged' her signaling her acceptance into the herd.

"Oh look at them Joe, they're beautiful; and these two are Arabians. They're of little use, show horses mainly; but this Indian Paint is absolutely gorgeous!" She was eying the horses carefully, seeing which were fit for this new world. She grinned at Joe, eyes wide with excitement, "she's a real beauty, perfect. She'll produce sturdy healthy horses."

He watched as she turned her eyes on the older chestnut mares, gently calming them. "These two mares are a little old, but we might be able to get one fold out of them."

She soothed them and spoke to them for a bit more. By the time she was finished she had them playfully following her about the pen.

Joe could immediately see her worth in this new world of ours. She would be an asset to any town; her friendship alone would be worth cultivating. Joe understood what this woman was trying to do - breed strong new horses for this new world. She was thinking ahead, towards the future. The town she came from had no idea what a treasure it had in its midst. After a while they left the pens and continued on up to the South Ridge. The star-studded night sky seemed to be lit up just for them. They sat in silence for a while looking up at it.

"If I may be presumptuous Victoria, do you have someone in your life, back in Sandstone? Are you married?" he watched her intently to see her reaction.

She turned and faced him smiling, "no Joe, there is no one there for me. I only stayed there because I had no where else to go." She smiled, "but that may be about to change. Once I start the breeding process and have a few horses, I will be able to resettle."

"An ambitious project, woman; you would be most welcome in Evansville. As the herd grows we will have need of horses. We have five gelding quarter horses and three mares; I would like to build on that."

Joe listened as she began to explain her plans and watched as she spoke with passion about her Stallion and her hopes for the future. He liked her ideas and her strong resolve to see it through.

"I would like to get to know you better, Victoria. We seem to have much in common; the same vision for the future. If we should find ourselves compatible in other areas, I would like to court you. You're a strong independent woman; the future will be built with women such as yourself."

Vicky whipped her head around and searched his eyes, looking to see if he was serious. "You're not teasing me, are you? I wouldn't find a statement like that funny."

He looked at her and smiled and said, "I do not tease." And then more forcefully, "I meant every word I said."

She stared at him a long time and he could see she was calculating this with her plans for the horses. "I just might be interested sir. But there is something you should be aware of, one possible problem that you as a cattle rancher might not approve of." She waited for him to ask, she would give him no quarter, not just yet.

"What problem? Tell me," he said angrily, "and we will remove it together."

"This is not a problem that can be removed. I have two friends Joe, one I told you about already, Samson, the stallion."

He nodded, "Go on..." and waited for her to continue.

"My other friend I raised since he was barely two days old, his name is Duke," here she smiled wryly, "he's a full-blooded grey wolf."

Without missing a beat, Joe smiled at her and answered quickly, "and what is the problem?"

"Your people might find it a little disconcerting to have a wolf in their midst." She searched his face for any concern and continued, "I assure you, Duke would pose no threat to your herd, but they might not believe that that is possible."

"There would be no problem." Joe said it with such conviction that Vicky believed him. He continued, "Times are different now; a lot of changes have taken place since the burning. I found and cared for a cougar cub myself. When it was strong enough I released it into the mountain. Even now and then, when I'm riding about in that area, she comes down the mountain and calls to me... a most amazing animal. Yet in all this time she has never taken one of our steers."

Vicky smiled and told him to turn around and look up. Sitting on a large boulder just above them was the biggest wolf Joe had ever seen. He had never even heard him following them. His thick coat was a bluish gray color and shined in the moonlight. His well-muscled body was taught as he looked to his mistress for instructions.

She called to him; "Duke, come!" She slapped her hip, "Here!"

The large animal leapt off the boulder and gracefully landed at her side; sat and waited. Vicky began to tell him how she had found Samson and Duke. How she had stumbled across the remains of their mothers. How she had found the frightened little colt trapped in a thicket nearby. In getting the colt free of the thorn bushes she had found the two-day-old wolf cub amid his dead brothers. Tired of having dealt with so much death she promised them she would try her best to keep them alive. She raised them together, and now they seemed to be more than just a horse and a wolf. They understood her when she spoke to them, and they anticipated her actions many times. She was convinced that there was a real connection between the three of them on some other level. Joe told her he understood her completely; he often felt the same way about the cougar.

"Would you like to meet him," she asked Joe and waited to see his reaction.

“Yes, very much so,” he said as he knelt down on one knee in front of the large animal.

She knelt beside him and told him, “Lick the back of your hand and hold it out for him to smell. He will identify you by it in the future.”

Joe did as she asked and the animal came forward and smelled his hand. After a few seconds he licked it and moving closer to Joe, licked his face. Joe laughed and patted the animal without fear.

Vicky studied his face for a long time looking for something. She smiled, and said so softly that he almost missed it, “Would you kiss me, please.”

He leaned towards her and raised his hand to her face. He gently caressed her cheek and leaned in and softly kissed her on the mouth. A deep burning filled his loins almost immediately; the effect was so unexpected that he fought for control.

Vicky also felt a stirring and she knew right then that she would eventually marry this large man; and she would be very happy. He had a strong moral character, she could see that already; a moral man in a time when all that seemed to have been lost. She could see him becoming more than just a town leader. A future with him might prove to be most exciting.

As they parted, she stared into his eyes and smiled. “You, sir, are full of surprises!”

Joe smiled and raised an eyebrow, all the while sliding his hand around her waist pulling her close. He took in the smell of her, touched her hair gently and instead of kissing her again, he simply held her to his chest enjoying the feel of her in his arms. Vicky feared that she might faint; her emotions were so strong.

“Joe, I promised to bring Samson here to breed with Lady Ashley’s mares. It should take about two months, just to make sure the mares are pregnant.” She pushed herself free of his embrace and continued, “When that is accomplished, I will be free to visit your town; with your permission of course.”

“Good,” he said letting her go, “I shall look forward to seeing you again.” He smiled at her and she felt her breath quiver.

“We will come by the roads; Samson and Duke are very good protection and besides, I have nothing to fear on the road. I’ll ask Master Jeffery for a map to your town.” She saw the worried look on his face. She reached over and laid her hand on his, “Joe, don’t worry. I’m a big girl; I can take care of myself.”

“I’m sure you can, but just to be on the safe side, please, ask Jake to send word to me when you leave. By horse we are three days ride from Dragons Hill.” He leaned forward and gently put his large hand on her shoulder, “Promise?”

She was touched by his gallantry, and his concern, “Ok, I promise.”

They sat in silence watching the skies and the stars. He began to tell her of his past leaving nothing out. She listened quietly, as he poured everything out. She was shocked at some things, and understood others; but she never passed any judgment. When he was finished she told him she was still coming; that he couldn't scare her away. He laughed and she liked the sound of his voice.

After a bit he walked her up to the guest quarters and bid her good night. She leaned in and gently kissed him on the cheek before turning quickly and going inside. Joe walked to his cave with a large smile on his face. Both Joe and Vicky had dreams that night, dreams of love, and of family.

Jake kept pace with the goings on and chuckled at the interaction of Joe and Victoria. *Yes, enjoy Lady Victoria; my debt to you and Joe will soon be paid in happiness.*

In the ensuing weeks Valotin and James returned to Dragons Bay, with Peter and Beau. The young dragon's joining with his rider had improved his health even more and both were thriving in their new relationship. Adam asked to stay for several more weeks to accompany Jake on an inspection tour of the country. He and Lady Emily would go along as traveling companions for Daniel and Kate.

Victoria returned to Sandstone only to be questioned at length by Sandstone's new town leaders. She answered their questions, but did not elaborate on anything; she had a very uneasy feeling about the questions they were asking and the aggressive tone they used. She played dumb on many of the questions. She stayed only long enough to gather her things together and make preparations to return to Dragons Hill with Samson. She was careful to tell no one about Joe or her promise to him; within a fortnight she was headed back to Dragons Hill. She left early one morning just before dawn with Samson, Duke, and all her meager possessions. It felt wonderful to be free from under the depressing feel of the town. It was only then that she realized she would never return. She was looking forward to the future, and to seeing Joe again.

On her journey back, she told both Samson and Duke about her stay at Dragon's Hill, and all about the people there. She described Kate and Daniel, and Lady Ashley and the horse pens where they would be going. Then she took her time and told them about Joe. She explained about her attraction to the man and her hopes for a future with him. They seemed to understand what she was relating to them.

As they came over a rise and started to enter the valley, Samson sensed the mares and began to neigh loudly. He was beside himself with excitement and it took all of her skills and strength to keep him from bolting. Ashley was waiting for her as they rounded the bend and the horse pens came into view.

"Vicky," she shouted and waved as she ran down to greet them, "hello! Jake told me you were in the valley on your way here."

Vicky dismounted and came over to her. "Ashley," she hugged her enthusiastically, "may I present Samson," she said with a wave of her hand, "my pride and joy!"

"Oh he's magnificent!" Ashley gushed as she walked around the huge stallion. "Just look at him, he's so big!" Patting his rump she continued, "From the size of his hoofs, I'd say he's got some Clydesdale in him, and from the look of his rump, possibly some Appaloosa. I would have never thought of a mix like that."

"Ashley, I could barely hold him in check, I hope your mares are ready for him! He's very excited, as you can plainly see," both women laughed, "so when I turn him loose, best stand out of his way."

Vicky removed Samson's saddle and bridle and he suddenly rose up and pawed at the air, neighing loudly. He ran to the pen and paraded himself around it like a sheik inspecting his harem. The mares neighed excitedly as he strutted by.

Vicky laughed, "look at him; he's so happy he can hardly contain himself." Ashley laughed with her, watching the large stallion strut before the mares.

"Ashley, come and meet Duke, he's my sweetie-pie," Vicky said as she turned around and went down on one knee. She called, and the great wolf came over and sat.

Ashley turned her attention to the large wolf. He was a silver grey color with a white chest and a dab of white on the paws. His thick fur and massive muscled body gave no doubt as the powerful beast he could become if provoked. Ashley licked the back of her hand and held it for the large animal to smell. Duke sniffed her hand and looked to his mistress. She was smiling in acceptance, so Duke licked Ashley's hand and rubbed against her nearly knocking her over.

"He's accepted you into our pack; and you needn't worry about any of your stock here. Duke won't bother them." Vicky patted his head and hugged the large animal to her running her hands thru his thick fur. He then turned and ran off to join Samson.

"He's really quite beautiful Vicky; well-muscled, a very powerful animal." Ashley stared as he ran around the pen with Samson. "I hope that this works Vicky; if it does, it means we will have horses again. And you and I will be in the horse business, woman." She slapped Vicky on the back good-naturedly. Vicky agreed and was secretly glad that Ashley had included her.

The two women went to the pen and opened the gate and let the mares loose. The excited females ran out to the pasture and began to parade themselves before Samson.

Ashley told her, "Leave the pen opened so the horses can come and go at will. They never leave the valley; they seem to know they are safe here."

"The Arabians are really beautiful Ashley, but do you think they will have sturdy colts? We need sturdy work horses in this new world of ours; not show horses." Vicky was being realistic.

"Jasmine will have no problem; she has a bit of quarter horse in her. Somewhere along the line someone wasn't vigilant." Both women knew that in breeding Arabians, lineage is everything. "I am worried about Shalimar though; she is definitely a purebred."

"Well, only time will tell; we'll just have to wait and see. This is just the beginning Ashley," Vicky put her arm around Ashley's shoulder, "at least we have something to start with."

"Well, let's leave them to it," Ashley said taking Vicky's hand, "Come with me young lady."

Ashley took Vicky to the guest quarters and told her to make the place her own while she was at Dragons Hill. Vicky dined with Ashley and Steve that evening and talk was of a successful mating of the mares with Samson.

Samson proved himself to be quite a Don Juan. Within a week he brought the beautiful Paint mare into heat and mated with her several times. Vicky knew that she would have a beautiful healthy foal. The two chestnut mares were not far behind her. The Arabians proved to be a little difficult. They were much faster than Samson on the run; and they kept him running. But Samson wasn't to be denied; he patiently waited for them to run themselves out and then he did his best 'I'm not interested' dance. They ended up chasing him for several days in utter exasperation. He finally took pity on them and allowed them to catch him. The colts from this mating would be the ones to watch carefully Vicky knew. Perhaps they would possess the best qualities of both parents; only time would tell.

Vicky confided in Ashley about the strange feeling she had when she returned 'home'. She told her what she found when she returned to Sandstone, and her questioning by the new town leaders.

"They were very aggressive, almost cruel." Vicky shuddered, "I remember seeing them around, and I always had a very disagreeable feeling when they were nearby."

Ashley told her that she had to report this strange behavior to Daniel; this was very important information that he needed to know. She took Vicky immediately up the mountain to Daniel; Vicky didn't understand the urgency at first.

Daniel explained to her that he and Jake were aware that the marauders seemed to have consolidated into one large group. They were sending out scouts to look over the countryside; and large groups were attempting to infiltrate and take over various towns.

Since her initial meeting with Jake and her description of the town and its leaders, Daniel and Jake feared that Sandstone would become a likely target. From the news she just brought, it appeared that their fears were well grounded. They must now remove the threat and instill the townspeople with the courage to fight for themselves. Daniel suggested that they bring in help from Dragons Bay; the former spies would be able to infiltrate the town and apply their skills to find out everything they needed to know before any action was taken. Jake and Daniel hatched a plan and word was sent to Dragons Bay. Within days Dee, Lee Chin, Nigel and Elliott arrived and went to work.

During her weeks at Dragons Hill Vicky and Ashley became very close; they shared confidences with each other about before the Burning and after. Ashley told her about the trek to Dragons Hill and how fearful she was about every little thing. She told her how with Jake's help she finally faced her fears and overcame them. She also told Vicky how she met Steve and how everything had changed when they fell in love. And then she told her about her dragon, Daowyn, and their first meeting. She introduced Vicky to her dragon, and with Jake's aid, Vicky was able to speak with the gentle giant. She was much taken with him and told Ashley she envied her.

Vicky confided in Ashley about her feelings for Joe, and her hope that there might be something there for them to build on. She expressed her excitement at going to Evansville to see him again. She said she just wished she had some better clothes to wear; hers were just about threadbare. Ashley laughed and said she and Vicky were going to go shopping. Ashley took Vicky to the town and they replaced her tattered wardrobe with a new one from the warehouse. Both women stayed two days at the house and indulged themselves.

Ashley offered to give Vicky a ride to Evansville on Daowyn, but Vicky declined saying that she was going to bring Samson there to breed with Joe's horses. She would get a map from Master Jeffery and it would be no problem at all, she traveled with Samson and Duke all the time. She did make a request of Ashley to get word to Joe that she was on her way. Ashley promised she would take the message herself. Vicky left two days later with a map from Master Jeffery in her hand.

Five days later found Joe on his way to the sentry tower, for the fifth time. He climbed the stairs two at a time and as he came out on top he looked about the plain in front of him. There was a well-worn path that led from the base of the mountain down to the plain and straight to Evansville.

“See anything yet, Stu?” He asked his friend, who was personally keeping watch.

Stuart was his second in command, a good man with a keen eye. They had traveled the country together after the Great Burning, and their friendship had become very strong. The bond between them was like that of brothers. Over the years they had saved each other’s life more than once. Stuart was a big barrel-chested man. His dark ebony colored skin and his large baldhead gave him a fierce some appearance. Just the way he liked it; ‘keeps them guessing’, he would jokingly say. He spoke little to anyone, but when he did – they listened. And yet for all his fierceness, he was always gentle and kind to the ladies; which explained why the women found him so attractive. He was never for want of female companionship.

“Nothing Joe; and last night there was no fire to indicate a camp. She should have been here by now. It only takes three days at the most.” He scrutinized his friend carefully; in all his years he had never known Joe to reveal his feelings about anything. Today however, he saw there was real concern on his friends’ face.

When Joe had returned from Dragons Hill, Stu had noticed a change in him, but said nothing. Then two days ago he saw a certain excitement begin to build. Joe had let slip that he was expecting a guest from Dragons Hill; a woman he had met while there. She was bringing a stallion to mate with their mares. He called her Lady Victoria. *So that was it!* Stu had been around Joe long enough to know his moods well. Joe was definitely attracted to this woman, and by his actions, Stu guessed that it might be a lot more. As the days went by, and she still didn’t show, Joe became more and more agitated.

“We’ll give it another couple of hours Stu, if she isn’t here by then, we will go see what the holdup is.” He turned around and headed back down the stairs.

Stu brought the binoculars to his eyes and scanned the base of the mountain once again. Movement in the tree line alerted him that something was making its way to towards the path. “What the...?” He thought he saw... “Joe, wait a minute.” He looked carefully again; *I know I saw something move out there.* He scanned the area again spotting a large gray wolf limping out of the tree line, “shit...!” He quickly yelled down to Joe, “Joe, you’d better get back up here, quick!”

Joe came bounding up the stairs, “what did you see?” Stuart handed him the binoculars and pointed to the area. Joe scanned the area and saw the large wolf, “It’s got to be Duke, her gray wolf.” He watched as the wolf slowly tried to make its way down the path. It was limping badly and having a difficult time of it.

Alarm flashed in Joe's eyes and he felt the sudden rush of adrenalin as he quickly bolted down the tower shouting orders as he went. He ran to Molly and as he mounted three men joined with him and they raced across the plain. Joe pulled up 20 feet from the wolf and told his men, "stay here, this might be tricky." He came forward and called to the large wolf.

"Duke, here boy, come on, I'm Joe, remember me; Lady Victoria's friend?"

Joe got down on one knee and licked the back of his hand. He held it out and allowed the wolf to come closer. Duke studied him for a moment and then recognition dawned on him. He limped to Joe and licked his out-stretched hand. He whined and looked back from where he had come.

Joe inspected his leg, *bullet wound. He's been shot!* "Easy boy, come with me, we'll get you fixed up." He lifted the large animal and placed him across his saddle, climbed up and headed for the town. Chills were whipping up his back, something was very wrong.

Once at the town he headed straight for the main ranch house. He sent one of the men for the doctor and then proceeded to carry Duke into his home. He laid him on the rug in front of the huge fireplace that dominated the room. The doctor came in and quickly stopped in his tracks. Joe stepped forward.

"It's ok Doc, this is Victoria's wolf; he won't hurt you. Just look at his leg, I think he's been shot." Joe's mind was racing.

"Where is Lady Victoria?" The doctor asked looking about the large room.

"That is the million dollar question, doc. Do what you can for him; I'm going to need extra help on this one." As Joe turned to leave Duke tried to rise up to follow. Failing that he let out a low mournful howl. Joe went back to him and knelt down, "its ok boy, we'll find your friend; I'm going to get help. Let the doctor help you; he will take away the pain and heal you up." The large wolf licked his hand and relaxed his body.

Joe headed out the door and went straight to the sentry tower. He told Stuart what they found and then he told him he was going to try to contact Jake. Stuart's eyes were big as saucers as he watched Joe, "can you do that Joe?"

"Yes, I've already done it before; its just telepathy. Listen Stu; I think Victoria is either hurt, or in very bad trouble. That wolf is the only one who knows for sure. Jake has someone who can find out for us what he knows."

"Ah, now I understand." Stu was quick to pick up on Joe's thoughts, "that birdman who helped us before, right?"

"You got it buddy, the very same." Joe went to the eastern side of the tower and stared out towards Dragons Hill. He put all thoughts out of his mind and concentrated. He pictured Jake, standing before him. *Jake? Jake can you hear me?* He waited for a moment and then tried again, *Jake, It's me Joe, I need your help.*

Joe? I can hear you dear boy, you don't have to shout, came thru loud and clear in Joe's mind. Your voice is very agitated, what is the problem Joe?

Victoria is missing Jake. Duke came limping out of the mountain this morning, he had been shot and Victoria is nowhere to be found. Do you sense her anywhere in the area? Joe prayed that Jake could help him find Victoria.

There was almost five minutes of absolute silence. When he thought he could stand it no longer he suddenly heard Jake say, I can feel her life sign, she is in great distress. She does not answer when I call to her. There is darkness in the forest of your mountain. Do nothing right now Joe. Daniel and I and the riders will be at your town shortly. Post many guards and keep your people in the town. Try to find out if anyone new is in town, I will explain when I arrive.

Thank you Jake, almost as an afterthought he relayed his fear to Jake, she means a lot to me. Joe turned around and gave Stuart the 'thumbs up' sign.

"New orders Stu, bring everybody back in to the town. Post extra sentries tonight, issue weapons to everybody. Jake says we may have some unwanted company." He started to go down the steps and then turned. "See if anyone new had come to town lately."

"We'll find her Joe, I give you my word," Stu would do just that; he would find her no matter what. "As to someone new, yeah, about two weeks back; young guy, he doesn't talk much, but he seems nice. Always helpful, wherever he's needed. Why do you ask?" Stuart had an uneasy feeling.

"Keep an eye on him, watch everything he does. Special men Stu, tell no one else, we may have a spy." Joe went down the tower with Stu right behind him. He headed to the ranch house, which he used as his main headquarters and home.

Stuart headed in the other direction and rounded up three of his best men. After a brief explanation about what Joe suspected, he turned them loose. These men were hardened long before the Burning times, and they didn't take to having a spy or some cutthroat in their midst. They would keep an eye on the young man in question. And when the time came, if he did indeed prove to be a spy, they would slit his throat without regrets.

"Millie?" Joe called to his ancient housekeeper, as he entered the house. "Millie!" Joe noticed Duke asleep on the rug and the doctor gone.

"What the hell are you yelling about Joe?" A wiry, white-haired spry little woman came into the room and stood there with her hands on her boney hips. She was all of five feet, if that, and stared up at him with a smile on her wrinkled face.

Joe found Millie on one of his treks across the countryside. She had been left for dead, suffering from the flu, because of her age. But she was still spirited enough to attempt to defend herself when she saw him and his men coming. Joe quickly set her mind at ease and took her with him. The wiry little woman had been his housekeeper ever since. Some speculated that she loved him as if he were her own son.

“I believe we are about to have guests Millie, you better make up the spare rooms. Jake is coming with Daniel, and quite possibly Lady Kate too! I think he’s bringing some large company with him.” He told her quickly.

“Jake... the Jake - Daniel and Lady Kate will be here - in this house? Oh my goodness Joe,” she said as she threw her hands up, “you don’t give a woman much warning,” she chastised him. “Oh my, can you imagine, Lady Kate...in our house.... and Jake outside!”

“Calm yourself old woman,” Joe scolded her; “they’re just people, like us.”

“Like us? They are nothing like us... they ride on Dragons! And by the way, what about the wolf in the living room?” she pointed to Duke asleep on the rug. “I tell you he was watching me like a hawk with those big grey eyes of his,” she gestured with her hands. “I gave him some water, and by God if he didn’t lick my hand!” She looked at the wolf and smiled, “he’s really quite gentle you know; I think he was just saying ‘thank you’ in his way.”

“Just leave Duke where he is for now. We have to find out what happened to Victoria, and he is our only link. I have things to do right now, woman, but I will be back later.” He was out the door before she could say anything else.

Millie quickly went about her work all the while talking to Duke, not realizing that the great wolf understood her and inwardly was thankful for her chatter. He was very worried about his mistress. She had told him to run, run quickly to Joe and get help. The last he had seen of her and Samson was just before he felt the burning pain in his shoulder. She had jerked forward suddenly and as she fell from the great beast he could see she had an arrow in her back.

Back at Dragons Hill Jake called his riders and dragons to the Mesa top. He did not understand why he couldn’t get thru to Victoria. She was still alive, this much he knew, but he could not get her to communicate. As his riders and dragons arrived he quickly explained the situation.

It’s got to be marauders, they have been moving this way, Daniel correctly guessed. We have been keeping tabs on them for some time, but I thought they were snowed in up in Montana.

You are correct Daniel, Jake informed him, the main group is still in Montana; but this small group is just a scouting party.

The bastards are becoming a problem, cursed a rankled Steve.

Raising his large head Jake continued, this also means there may be a spy in Joe’s midst. He has reported to me that there has been only one new face in camp; a young man came in two weeks ago. Joe has put several ‘watchers’ on him.

A serious faced Adam flew to the mesa and went straight to Jake. Everyone was aware of his abilities and all guessed that Jake had sent him to gather information.

Jake turned to Adam, *What say you my friend, have your friends brought you news?*

Jake, Adam nodded respectfully, the hawks say that eight evil men are camped in a cave on the other side of the mountain. They have set up a looking post on the top so they can see all around them. They speak into black boxes; I think they are radios, or walkie-talkies. Adam fidgeted about a bit and then continued. They say that there was a fight several nights ago. Lady Victoria fought them valiantly; but the evil men shot her down. When these men got to her they became very excited. They immediately covered her eyes with a black piece of cloth. Adam looked at Daniel and Kate; they say that these men think she's a dragon rider. They are keeping her eyes covered so she can't communicate with her dragon and tell him where she is.

Why would they think she rides a dragon? Kate questioned.

"Oh my God," the outburst came from Ashley who had turned pale as a ghost. It's my fault Jake, oh I never thought...! Her hands went to her face; Jake has always referred to Vicky as 'Lady Victoria'; so I had her name emblazoned on a new saddle I gave her. It was a gift from me to her, Ashley looked from Daniel to Kate, I had no idea it could cause such a problem.

Steve put his arm around Ashley, you couldn't have known my love, and it's not your fault.

Daniel was deep in thought; everyone in the surrounding area knows that all the female riders are called 'Lady' whatever... so these devils assumed that she was a rider.

Precisely Daniel, Jake was agitated, that is why we must locate her immediately.

Jake, this leader of theirs knows way too much about dragons and the way they communicate with their riders, Adam continued.

Daniel was pretty sure he knew what this was and spoke out, he has obviously trained his men well, teaching them what to look for and how to deal with a rider in a situation like this. This is no ordinary lawless criminal. Daniel felt a sinking sensation in his gut; I always knew that one day a strong leader would take over these cutthroats. We may be in for some bad times when that snow melts and the pass is cleared. We need more information on these bastards.

First things first Daniel; Jake was issuing orders, we must find out where Lady Victoria is exactly, and we must rescue her. Then we will deal with these vermin. Jake called to Adam again; we must go to Evansville, so that you may speak with her wolf. But you must conceal your wings for now. If the town is being watched, I do not want them to know about you just yet.

I understand Jake, and I agree. Adam replied, surprise is on our side. Also I should be able to find out more from the animals in the surrounding area. I can send some birds up the mountain to survey the area.

Make it so Adam, Jake ordered.

Daniel's mind had been racing, he now added, *Jake, Steve and Michael and Jerry and I can devise a plan of attack from the backside of the mountain. We can coordinate everything to happen at the same time. When we strike it will be swift and deadly. No survivors.* He turned to Jerry, *Jerry can you rig up something that would interfere with their radio communications?*

Jerry smiled quickly, *not a problem, matter of fact, I can mess them up real good.*

Adam informed Jake quickly, *I have asked several hawks to find out everything they could about the lay of the land. I have given orders to the birds, when they return I should be able to relay that to your artists.*

Good, make everything so. Jake rose up and lifted his great head; Adam, Kate and I shall go to Evansville now. Lady Ashley and Daowyn will accompany us. We will know more after Adam speaks with the wolf; and shall make our plans accordingly. Come when you are ready Daniel.

Daniel kissed Kate goodbye, and watched as the small band left the mesa and headed west. He had a bad feeling about all of this. He knew if a military man had taken over the bands of marauders that roamed the countryside and united them; they could pose a very terrible threat to the peace that had been restored to the land.

Pain... searing pain woke Vicky from unconsciousness. It spread across her shoulder and down her back. *Mustn't move or make any sound. Hurt... oh the pain...hurt so...* She heard Samson whinnying somewhere off to her left, *oh Samson, don't hurt him, please.*

“Hey, the bitch is coming around again. Wilson, I need more chloroform.” His was a brash and violent sounding voice, coming from behind her.

“We can't keep this up; it will kill her, and Dixon will kill us both. He wants one alive; you know that; he wants one for himself.” The last was said in a leering disgusting tone. “Just keep her here in the cave, and don't touch her!”

She heard him walking off and the other one moved to the side of her. She was suddenly aware that he was kneeling down beside her.

“What's so special about you bitch? Why does he want you so bad?”

He was too close, Vicky suddenly got very scared. He roughly slid his callused hand into her shirt and grabbed her right breast.

“Yeah, that's what I need; a nice good sized tit in my hand.” She tried to fight him kicking out and striking him in the balls, which only made him madder. He hit her hard and she felt her lip split. He kept hitting her till she was still. He roughly tore open her shirt and held her down. She braced herself for what she knew was coming.

“Argh... uh...” Suddenly she felt him go rigid and just as suddenly slump over her; “aaah...” a long gurgling sound that sort of faded. A large boot kicked him off of her and then she heard the other man.

“Somebody take this piece of shit outta here!” He bent over her and closed her shirt, roughly wrapping a blanket around her. “He won't bother you or anyone else anymore.” He gently lifted her head and poured some water into her mouth. “Don't mistake this for anything other than wanting to save my own neck. If anything happens to you, Dixon will kill us all. Now, try to rest, your wound is bleeding again. Oh, and lady, don't even think about calling for help; I really don't want to kill you.”

Vicky heard him leave the cave, and lay there for a moment, waiting, listening before she moved. Her head was so fuzzy, she couldn't think straight. She could feel something warm oozing down from her forehead and she knew it was blood. Panic had seized her mind and began to rise; she knew she was in very bad trouble. She couldn't remember everything that happened, her head hurt so badly.

Duke! Oh God I hope Duke made it to Joe's. Oh this is very bad, very, very bad; everyone is in danger. Must get help... JAKE... was all she could think... maybe he could hear her. Suddenly everything began to spin around her; No! Got to get help, Jake, help... Oh... no...! Vicky passed out again.

Bronson came back into the cave and checked her again. “Shit – she’s bleeding again,” he spat out as he applied a new dressing to her wound. “This woman is going to be the death of us all. What is Dixon thinking? The man’s insane... capturing a dragon-rider! We’re all gonna end up burnt over this!”

Joe was waiting on the open plain at the far end of the town when Jake landed. Daowyn, with Lady Ashley, landed behind him. He marveled at the muscled green dragon. Joe bowed and thanked Jake for coming so quickly. He was surprised to see Adam there wrapped in a large blanket, but quickly understood. Kate came over and introduced Lady Ashley, explaining her close friendship with Vicky. They were there for Vicky’s sake, if they found her alive, she told him, she would need women friends near her.

Joe thanked her for coming and also commented that her dragon was magnificent to see. Daowyn puffed up after Lady Ashley translated, he told her to tell him he a keen eye for a human. Joe laughed at that response.

Jake suddenly raised his massive head quickly, *Lady Victoria? I am here! Lady Victoria, are you there?*

All three looked towards Jake, Joe asking, “was it her?” *Oh...forgot. Was it her Jake?*

Jake lowered his head to Joe, *for a brief moment I heard her try to call to me. She is alive, and in pain. She is very frightened, I could feel it as she touched my mind, and she was trying very hard to gain control.*

“The filthy bastards; I’m gonna kill every last one of them!” Joe was filled with frustration and rage.

Joe! Get yourself under control. Jake let out a low roar that brought Joe to sharp attention. You are no good to us if you allow your rage to rule here. We have come with a plan. First, please take Adam to the wolf; he must speak to him. Then you must alert your trusted men, if they should see a flock of falcons and hawks coming this way, inform Adam quickly. Our spies are working for us even now as we speak.

Joe’s mind was clearing and reason was returning, he realized that Jake was right. He bowed slightly and told Jake, *I’m sorry I let it get away from me. Joe pulled a small walkie-talkie out of his pocket. You see this Jake? It was pulled off of that newcomer I told you about. You were right, he was sent here to spy on us. My guys have him in the barn over there. Do you want to interrogate him?*

Daniel will be here shortly, I shall leave that distasteful business to him. I am going to return to Dragons Hill, I want them to think that I have gone. Daowyn is flying the heights above; don’t bother to look for him, you won’t see him. If anything should happen call to me. He can be here in seconds. Jake stretched his wings and took off, flying off over the mountain and back towards Dragons Hill.

Joe led the small group to the ranch house and they went inside. Millie was waiting as they entered. She had been watching at the window and had marveled at the size of the large dragon. She curtsied as Kate and Lady Ashley entered and welcomed them warmly.

This is Millie, she's sort of my housekeeper," Joe said obviously thinking of something else.

"Sort of? Is that anyway to introduce me, you big ox!" She admonished him and quickly realized by the look on his face that he was very worried. Turning quickly to Kate and Lady Ashley she led them into the large living room. "Can I get anything for you ladies?"

"No, no Millie, we're just fine," Kate said sweetly taking her hand, "Thank you so much for your hospitality." Turning, she motioned Adam forward, "I'd like to introduce Adam, a very special friend of Jake." Adam smiled and let the blanket fall to the floor.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," Millie shouted in surprise and took a step backwards, crossing herself, "you've come to take Duke, an angel!"

Adam laughed, "No madam, I most certainly am not an angel. I'm just an ordinary man, with wings."

They went into the living room and saw that Adam was sitting beside the large grey wolf. They were staring at each other intently. After several minutes Adam patted his head and the wolf lay down again. Adam rose and walked over to the others.

"He's grateful to you Joe, for taking the bullet out of his shoulder, he was in a great deal of pain. He feels very guilty for not being able to save his mistress, but she ordered him to leave her and go find you."

Adam turned and looked at the large wolf and then at Joe, "he says he saw her take an arrow in the back. When she fell she ordered him to go. He says there are eight men up there. They have no scent; he had no idea they were there until just before they attacked. He said they spoke with their hands during the fight, and made no sound."

Joe looked at the large wolf with a deeper understanding; things were indeed different in this new world of ours. He walked over and knelt down, "you did your best boy, I'm just glad that you made it here to tell us what happened." He gently stroked his head, "don't you worry, we will get her back."

Joe stood up and went back to the group. "They're military by the sound of them. Well, they just met their match." He turned around, "when is Daniel due to arrive," he asked Kate.

Just then the door opened and in walked Daniel and Steve and Jerry. Everyone turned around, "what did we miss, fill us in," he said as they came forward.

Twenty minutes later they were all sitting around a large table in the dining room. Joe filled them in on all that had happened.

“I usually don’t say much about my past, bragging is for fools. But this calls for some special skills. I was a Navy Seal before the burning Daniel; I have my team with me here on the ranch. Just tell me what you want us to do.” Joe was deferring to Daniel as the leader of this expedition. “I ask only one thing, when we find Victoria, no one touches her but me. There is no telling what they have done to her, and how she’ll react. I want her to know that I don’t care; I only want her home with me, safe and sound.”

Understanding, Daniel answered immediately, “no problem.” He could see that Joe was much more than just smitten with Vicky. Daniel cleared his throat, “now, where is this so-called spy Jake was telling me about?”

Joe turned around and smiled slyly at Daniel, “he’s in the barn over there,” he said with a nod of his head. “Just tell Stu that you’re the Librarian; he’ll understand.” Daniel jerked his head around and stared at Joe with new respect; very few people knew what a Librarian was; let alone what they did.

In the military world, clandestine operations were going on all the time. In dealing with seasoned terrorists, information had to be taken from captives quickly. Regular interrogators were of no use on these men. Nothing would make them talk; nothing that is, except a Librarian. An imposing figure all dressed in black; a mask covering his face; he says nothing, never asks a question. He simply goes to work on the most sensitive areas of the human body. The longest holdout time on record was 42 minutes.

Daniel had done this only one time in his life; and he never regretted it. He was in a situation where minutes were counting down and he had to know the truth. He saved the lives of over 200 innocent elementary school children. But it was terrible ugly work, soul wrenching. It had taken him a long time to get past it. Jerry had offered to be the Librarian this time; he said he would consider it payback for all those poor souls these bastards had tortured and killed.

The three men left the ranch house and headed towards the barn. Stu saw them coming and knew immediately what was going down; he opened the door and let them in. They never spoke a word to the poor fool that was strung up in there. In the end he spilled his guts to them; crying like a baby he told them everything he thought they wanted to know and even some things they didn’t want to know. When they were sure there was nothing else he could tell them, Jerry quickly put him out of his misery.

Back at the house, as Kate watched them go, she began to realize that there were many things in Daniels’s past that she still was not privy to; she would wait for him to come to her. She knew he would tell her in his own time. An hour and half later the men returned; Kate could see a large bonfire going out in the field behind the barn.

“Millie, would you get some glasses and bring the whiskey, please love,” Joe requested. She quickly returned and then left the room and went back to the kitchen to continue preparing dinner. She didn’t want to listen in on this conversation.

Daniel and Steve walked into the house in silence and went straight to the table and poured three large drinks. Daniel turned around and waited till Jerry came in; he handed him one and then took his. Joe knew then that Jerry had been the Librarian. All three drank it down quickly.

“Ok, here’s what we got.” Daniel began, “they are part of a large team that was sent out to gather information. They are composed of ten men each. There is one on its way to Dragons Hill, to dig in and survey the area. Jake is going to take care of them. They have orders to get a dragon-rider if possible. But they are not to give themselves away; the mission comes first.” Daniel poured Jerry another drink and then he continued. “The kid also said that he was pretty sure that another team had infiltrated a town near Dragons Hill but he didn’t know which one. They had left several weeks before his group and had reported success to their leader.” Daniel looked to Kate, “I think we know which town it was, Sandstone.”

“Oh no,” exclaimed Kate, “then Vicky was right, there was something going on in her absence. Oh my God, this means there could be other towns in danger. We have to do something Daniel, and we have to do it quickly.”

“Jake has been informed and says that he will take care of the problem himself. Now to the nasty part,” Daniel looked at Joe, “they spotted Vicky coming down the path and were going to let her go by; they didn’t want to reveal themselves; but they panicked when they saw the wolf. At the last minute they attacked in silent mode; she was hit and went down. They were going to kill her when one of them saw her saddle. They thought they had a dragon-rider. They had strict orders from their leader and followed a set protocol in case they got one. They covered her eyes immediately so she couldn’t tell her dragon where she was. Then they drugged her with some chloroform to keep her quiet. They radioed their base camp and relayed that they had a ‘package’. They were told to sit tight; to keep her alive at all costs.”

Jerry took a deep breath and looked at Joe with cold dead eyes, “Joe, they were going to kill all the men here and take your women and your cattle. The little weasel had made sketches of all your defenses; and Joe, each woman was marked and labeled.” Jerry took a deep breath, “He’s drawing in Hell now, the bastard!” He spit out the words. “We have details of their weaponry and all their coded signals.”

Steve picked up here and continued; “We also know that they killed one of their own last night when he tried something with Vicky.”

Steve saw the look on Joe’s face and quickly continued, “she wasn’t harmed Joe. Now to this guy running the show, his name is Dixon, he’s ex-military. He’s a very strong leader; he’s managed to pull all the different bands together under his leadership. He trains them day and night; he is relentless and gives no quarter. You screw up – you’re dead.”

“Now you might be asking yourself, what drives a man like this; why would he join up with a bunch of cutthroats and murders. Well it’s really quite simple; you see he’s insane.” Daniel waited for this to sink in before he continued. “He lost his dragon to the black ones when they attacked them; he survived – his dragon didn’t. He’s mad as a hatter, what you call certifiably insane, but viciously so.”

“My God,” exclaimed Lady Ashley.

Daniel took a breath and continued, “We are all in big trouble if we don’t deal with this guy as soon as the spring thaw starts. He’s hell bent on destroying everyone and everything. But first things first, we go after Vicky tomorrow night. Adam’s friends will be returning soon and we will know more about the area.”

There was a slight knock on the door and Joe got up and went over and opened it. A young boy was standing there.

“You sent for me Joe?” he asked a little hesitantly.

He was barely a teenager, maybe 14. Slight of build, he had a nasty burn down one side of his lower face and it disappeared below his shirt. He had the bluest eyes that Kate had ever seen. He looked her way and there seemed to be a moment of recognition in those eyes, and then he smiled. That smile was so genuine, so real, that it erased away any thought of the ugly scar he bore; Kate couldn’t help herself, she smiled back.

“Ah David, come in, please come in. Everybody, this is David; best damn artist you ever saw. David, this is Daniel, and Lady Kate,” the boy was dumbfounded. He took Kate’s offered hand and stood there holding it and grinning. Joe continued with the introduction, but the boy heard none of it until Joe boomed, “David!” He jumped and let go of Kate’s hand and turned around.

“Sir, I’m sorry, but, but this is Lady Kate!” Joe softened a bit remembering his first meeting with Daniel and Kate.

“David, we have an emergency going on here, and we need your help boy. I want you to come with me; there is someone very special I want you to meet in the next room.” Joe put his arm around the young boy’s shoulder and led him into the living room. Adam was standing by the fire. “David, I’d like you to meet Adam, a personal friend of Jake’s.”

David stood still staring at Adam wide-eyed, and mouth open. Adam smiled and came over to him extending his hand.

David took his hand and smiling said, “you...you have wings!”

“Yes I do David, and I can fly too!” Adam smiled and took the boy over towards the fire. He began to talk to him in low soothing tones. He explained the situation, and what they were trying to attempt to do. He explained how he could communicate with all animals.

David was enthralled, “all animals?”

Adam nodded and then told him he had asked the birds to fly to the camp and study the area carefully. They were waiting for the birds to return; “they will relay pictures to me David. And I will need you to draw those pictures; I’m told you are very good. Do you think you can do that David? We are all counting on your ability with the pencil.”

“Charcoal, I use charcoal,” he replied softly. “I can draw anything Adam, it’s the only thing I can do real well.”

“Good. We’re going to get along just fine. Do you need to get your materials?” The boy nodded, “ok, then go and get them. But David, say nothing to anyone about this, ok?”

“You can count on me Adam, I’ll be right back.” He ran past Kate and smiled again and ran out the door.

“Joe, what is his story, does he have family here or is he alone?” Kate asked, curious.

“I found him several years ago living in a cave; he was almost feral. Scared of everything, took a lot to coax him out, he’s come a long ways since then. He’s a good boy, and his drawings are almost life-like. When a Town Crier comes to town he’s always there listening to the stories. He drew a picture of you from memory of one a Crier carried with him one time.”

The door opened and Stu came in and went to Joe, “a flock of birds are headed this way Joe. They are a mixed flock; small brown ones and large hawks, very strange.”

“Everyone, this is Stu, my second in command.” Joe made introductions all around, Stu never showed any emotion, even when he met Adam. All he said was, “nice wings man.” He went to the door and was reaching for it when David returned.

“Adam,” he called excitedly as he burst inside, “your birds are coming!”

Stu turned to Joe, “The sun will be going down shortly; I’m going to walk the town, make sure everything is buttoned up.” Stu turned to the guests and said with a short bow, “nice to meet you folks. See you later Joe.” He was out the door in seconds.

Adam quickly asked Joe “Is there a back door to this place? I need a spot where I can converse in private without the prying eyes of our enemy.”

Joe turned to Daniel, “is the barn available?”

“Not a problem, clean as a whistle,” answered Jerry quickly.

Adam and David left and went to the barn. As the rest of them watched from the front porch, the birds began to arrive in small groups and flew thru the open hay door. The sun was making its way down rapidly, so Joe and Steve set up some lights in the barn for David. The rafters were soon filled with chirping birds. David watched in thrilled admiration as they all went silent when Adam entered.

Millie came out onto the porch and announced that dinner was ready and they all went inside. She sent two steaming trays of food out to the barn for Adam and David along with a pitcher of tea. She assumed that they would be busy for some time. She also sent out a large bucket of water (for the birds).

Inside the house everyone took their seats and joined hands; Joe led them in a prayer of thanksgiving. The meal was a simple beef stew loaded with carrots and potatoes and green beans. It was spicy and very tasty. There were three long loaves of homemade bread with a large tub of hand-churned butter. There was also tea, spring water, and coffee. Dessert was the biggest and tastiest apple pie they had ever eaten - Millie's specialty. Kate made sure she complimented Millie profusely on the meal; and Ashley asked her for the recipe for the stew. Both women helped her clear the table and Millie loved the attention.

Daniel was impressed with the way Joe had set up his town and his ability to provide simple things such as flour for his people.

"Joe, where do you get the flour for the bread?" He asked curiously, "do you trade with another town?"

"As a matter of fact we do, Daniel, it's about two days ride from here. They have more grain than they know what to do with. I bring them two steers every couple of months and we get two wagons of grain. Millie knows how to turn it into flour; she used to do it when she was just a girl." He smiled up at her as she came into the room, "she's trained the women, and some men, in how to process it. She makes great bread; fresh from the oven with some of that hand churned butter on it, oh man on a cold night, it hits the spot."

"You're pretty self sufficient here, and you run a very tight-knit town. Your people are very friendly and they seem to really care about each other." Daniel was praising Joe on his leadership. "I commend you on your endeavor here, Joe; you have done very well."

"Ok, what's all this praise for?" Joe was suspicious of being singled out like this.

"I assure you it is long overdue. Jake himself says that what you accomplished here is truly amazing. He says you are a moral man of strong convictions and just what we need in this new world of ours." Daniel smiled, "You see Joe, dragons pride themselves on the company they keep. A compliment from them is a rare honor."

Joe looked at Daniel as if judging the man. “Thank you, but we all did this; it wasn’t just me. Every one of those people out there,” he said pointing towards the door, “they had a hand in all of this. We all sweated blood to make this happen.”

Kate walked into the room and Joe rose immediately, he was still the gentleman where women were concerned. “But Joe,” she said softly, “they all did this because of your vision for the future. They followed you Joe, because they believed in you.”

“Yes ma’am, thank you ma’am,” he said softly. Kate could see that he was unaccustomed to praise. To him it was simply the right thing to do.

Daniel could see that he was uncomfortable and quickly changed the subject. “Okay gentlemen let’s get some plans in motion. First off, Joe, do you have a town doctor here?”

“Yes we do, he was a plastic surgeon before the burning. But he’s come along real fine as far as what we need here. He says he feels useful again; he really seems to enjoy helping others.” Joe looked at Kate, “He’s always searching for medical books; you wouldn’t happen to know of where any could be found, would you?”

Kate smiled and quickly answered, “As a matter of fact, yes, I do! There’s a library I can take him to; he can have whatever books he needs from there.”

“Ma’am, you just made his year! He’ll be delighted,” Joe grinned at Kate. Ashley came into the room and sat down on the large leather couch.

“Joe, we brought Kate and Ashley along for Vicky’s sake.” Daniel began to explain, “We don’t know what happened to her yet, and she may need friends she knows, women friends, you understand?” Daniel explained.

Ashley placed her hand on Joe’s arm, “Joe, we became very close these past few weeks. I know for a fact that she was looking forward to seeing you again. She wasn’t planning on going back to Sandstone, ever.” Ashley was trying to tell Joe how much Vicky cared for him, without breaking the confidence she has shared with her.

“Lady Ashley, Lady Kate,” Joe began in a gentle voice as he leaned forward, “I had every intention of courting Victoria when she arrived here. And if we hit it off like I know we would have, I was going to ask her to marry me. She is a good woman; strong and independent; just the kind of woman this new world of ours needs.”

Daniel could see now how strongly Vicky had affected this man. He guessed correctly, that Joe had been a loner all his life, never needing a woman to make his world complete until he met Vicky. He had carved a town out of the Wyoming countryside, and built a new world for himself here. After meeting Vicky he realized how lonely he was without someone to share it with. Daniel felt for him, he had known the same thing.

“We’ll get her back Joe, I promise you,” Daniel said putting his hand on Joe’s shoulder.

The door opened and Adam and David came in smiling. “We have it all,” Adam said triumphantly.

He went to the dining room table and took the papers from David and placed them carefully around. Everyone gathered about the table. Spread out was a complete layout of the marauders camp, right down to pictures of each man. And in one was a perfect rendering of the inside of a cave depicting Vicky lying against a wall, still and silent. Her clothes were torn and ripped; there was dried blood on her face and shoulder.

Joe picked up the picture, his face pale, “Victoria,” he said in a barely audible whisper.

“Joe,” Daniel raised his voice to snap him out of it, “we need your team here for this; will you call them please.”

“What? Oh yes, I’ll get them right away.” He was off out the door in flash.

Joe returned a few minutes later with Stu and four very tough looking men. Introductions were made and they all gathered around the table. Plans were drawn up; Daniel’s group would come up from the backside of the mountain. Joe’s group would make their way silently up the front of the mountain. Stu saw a possible hitch in their planning. After explaining they all agreed that Stu was right; they needed something to distract the attention of the lookouts.

Daniel told them not to worry; Jake would take care of that himself.

Vicky regained consciousness and stayed very still. She called to Jake immediately.
Jake, can you hear me? Jake, please be there.

I am here Lady Victoria, he told her reassuringly. We know where you are, and help in on the way to you. Stay quiet and still till it is over. Your wolf Duke made it to Joe and warned us of the danger lurking in the mountain. No matter what you hear, stay in the cave.

Yes Jake, I’ll do as you say. Vicky sighed a breath of relief, Oh thank you God.

Everything was in place and ready, they would wait till dusk to begin. Joe and his men spent the better part of the afternoon slowly getting into position at the base of the mountain. A final flight from two of the hawks confirmed that nothing had changed. As the sun made its way to kiss the red mountains on the western side of the valley, Daniel and his men were almost at the top of the side of the mountain.

As darkness settled on the mountain Jake began his charade. Suddenly off in the distance there was a great flaming; it lit up the night sky. All the sentries at the top were drawn to the sight. Jake was attacking the other band of infiltrators and making a big show of it. Binoculars to their eyes, concentrating on what they were watching, they never heard Daniel and his men climb up behind them. They were still watching intently as their throats were slit.

Two down, six to go.

Joe and Stu made their way up and over another set of boulders. Hand signals sent two of Joe's men to the horse pen to free Samson. Joe had voiced concern earlier that that part was going to be tricky, the horse could spook. Adam alleviated his fears when he said that he had informed the horse that help was coming.

Joe and Stu silently moved thru the brush towards the main camp. They counted on Daniel and his men to be doing the same from the other side. Two men were sitting by a fire eating some jerky. Slowly Stu and Joe inched their way towards them. Daniel and Steve watched as they slipped out of the brush and silently came forward. They slit the throats of the two men before they even realized what had happened to them.

Four down, four to go.

Inside the cave Vicky was waiting with growing dread. Listening carefully and making sure no one was in the cave; she managed to remove her blindfold. Slowly she began to untie her hands. She wasn't making much progress when she spotted a large Bowie knife by one of the rocks that circled the small fire they had left going to keep her warm. Believing her to be unconscious, they did not fear any trouble from her. That was their first mistake. After all she was only a woman they deduced, what possible trouble could she be? That was their second mistake.

Vicky dragged herself to the fire and retrieved the knife. She quickly cut her bonds and stood; dizziness swept over her and she fought to keep her balance. She was weak from loss of blood, but she was also very angry. Her anger at her treatment was fueling her resolve to take action, do something. Jake had told her to remain in the cave, but she was worried these men would try to kill her when they saw they were outnumbered. She went to the sidewall and quietly made her way to the cave entrance. As she peeked around the corner she saw two men on the landing about twenty feet away. She watched them carefully, waiting for a chance to slip out of the cave. They seemed to be arguing over something one of them held. One of them was talking into what appeared to be a radio. He was spewing a string of profanities and slapping the radio.

It suddenly dawned on Vicky, like a light bulb going on; she could inform Jake what was happening at this end. She could keep him apprised of what the ruffians were doing and he could relay it to Joe. She eased back to the cave and leaned against the wall and concentrated.

Jake can you hear me, she called. They are having trouble raising their men on the radios. They are getting very agitated.

Stay in the cave Lady Victoria! Jake's voice was commanding, and Vicky slid back inside quickly. Joe is almost there.

Vicky's shoulder began to throb and she could feel something sliding down her back. Her movements in trying to rid herself of the bonds had caused her wound to open again. Damn, I'm bleeding again.

Vicky peeked around the corner of the cave again and suddenly saw a change in the two men. They quickly threw sand on the fire and put it out. They pulled out their pistols and a rifle and moved towards the edge of the landing. They had on some funny goggles that she recognized as night-vision goggles; they seemed to be looking over the landing towards the valley below. One of them took the rifle and cocked it and took aim at something below.

As Joe and Stu were crouched down in the brush, they spied one more of the rogues inching his way around the mountain. The man had spotted Daniel, and was concentrating on making his way up behind him. Stu grinned at Joe and raised an eyebrow as he jerked his head in the direction of the man. Joe nodded agreement and Stu took off and silently made his way towards him. He returned two minutes later wiping his knife.

Six down, two to go.

The two men above were getting skittish; they walked about the landing looking below, they could see nothing, and calls to their men were not answered. The leader tore off his night vision goggles and threw them down.

"This is bullshit! We can't raise anyone on the radios. We both know what that means," he said to his comrade. Fear was creeping into his eyes and his voice as he continued, "I'm not gonna die for Dixon, not over a woman!"

"Yea, well, we have a real nice bargaining chip there Stan," his friend answered lewdly, shouting over the edge, "they won't do anything as long as we have that bitch in the cave!" Again he yelled, "If they don't want anything to happen to their precious dragon rider, they better clear off!" All the while he spoke he was backing up towards the cave; suddenly Stan shouted and opened fire in all directions.

"You bloody idiot, what the fuck are you shooting at?" Bronson hit him on the side of his head,

"Is anyone shooting back at you, you dumb fuck!" Bronson began to back up towards the cave as he spoke, looking about him quickly, in all directions.

Watching from the other side of the cave, Joe and Stu had clear view of the opening and beyond. The fire inside the cave highlighted the entire scene. Joe felt a cold chill when he saw Vicky creep up behind the man. The look on her face was one of rage, and something else, something cold and emotionless. Almost before it happened Joe knew what she was going to do. In one swift blinding movement she raised her hand, almost like a ballerina in a pirouette; she quickly slit the man's neck open, severing the jugular vein. She continued her circular spin, never missing a step. The man staggered forward clutching his throat, blood gushing everywhere. Too late he realized his mistake. He went to his knees gurgling and gasping and clawing at the air. His heart continued to pump - spewing his blood all over his cohort, much to the other man's horror.

Everything suddenly speeded up, and yet to Daniel and Steve it was like a slow motion ballet. The second man turned in horror and watched as his cohort in crime fell, spewing blood all over him. He spun around searching for the assassin in the nearby trees, and rocks. Gradually his mind cleared and he saw Vicky standing there, drenched in blood, the Bowie knife still in her hands. His fear exploded into full-blown panic, he backed up quickly, raising the gun as he stumbled and fell. He quickly scrambled to his feet looking around wildly. At a word from Steve, Lady Elzbeth flew overhead and roared loudly. The rattled man looked up in fear and began firing wildly in all directions screaming like a wild man.

Stu raised his gun and put a bullet between his eyes at the exact same time Daniel and Steve let loose with a barrage of fire. The man jerked and twisted, still firing wildly, as bullets hit his body sending him sprawling into the cave. Joe and Stu rushed forward with Daniel and Steve and entered the cave. The scene was one of mayhem, blood, and bodies.

Joe found Vicky lying face down on the ground in a slowly spreading puddle of blood, the large Bowie knife still clutched in her hand. He gently turned her over and checked her out; she had been hit in her right thigh. Her lower lip was split, and her left eye was already swelling closed; she also had a nasty dark bruise on her left cheek. Joe lifted her in his arms, brushing the dirt from her face.

"Victoria!" His voice cracked, "come on girl," he gently patted her face, "don't you die on me woman!"

Vicky stirred, coughed, and tried to open her eyes, "well it took you long enough, you big lug," she said in a raspy voice. They all chuckled at her spunk.

Joe held her to him, "I thought I lost you," he whispered in her ear.

She was weak and dazed and loosing blood, "Oh, Joe, you came for me," she sighed once and slipped into unconsciousness. Stu came forward and took a quick look at her; he pulled out his med-kit and placed several pressure bandages on her wounds.

"Joe, we need to get her back to Doc; she's been hurt bad." He had never seen his friend so emotional about a woman. This was something new.

Joe held her to him tightly; he took a long deep breath and pulled himself under control. Stu took Vicky from Joe and she was lost in his massive arms. Daniel pulled a blanket out of his gear and they wrapped her in it. He then directed Stu to the cave opening where Adam was landing. Stu handed Vicky over to him.

Adam saw the look on Joe's face and recognized his torment. "I'll have her there inside five minutes Joe, I promise." Adam took off quickly and headed for the ranch.

"Ok gentlemen, any suggestions?" Daniel asked.

Joe snapped back to his old self again as he answered icily, "I want no trace of their ever being here. I want everything cleaned and cleared off. Daniel, will the dragons flame them and all their equipment to dust?"

Steve answered quickly, "Daowyn is flying above with Lady Elzbeth, and she says that he said he would be happy to rid you of this filth."

"Make it so Steve, the sooner the better," Joe walked around the cave and bent down and picked up a radio, "but I think that maybe we should keep these radios. They may come in handy later on, when they begin to move."

"Good idea Joe," Daniel said quickly, "I was going to suggest the same thing. Ok guys let's pile up everything on the landing. Daowyn and Lady Elzbeth can do their thing better out there."

The men began the dirty business of gathering up all the bodies. They removed all the radios and also took their weapons and several notebooks with instructions in them. The rest, along with their bodies, was placed in a pile, and the men stood back as the great dragons flew over and flamed everything to dust. When they were sure the place was clean and no trace remained of anything, they began the long trip back down the mountain. They talked among themselves on the way down.

"Did you see how fast she moved, Joe, man when you pick 'em, you sure do pick 'em," said Stu enthusiastically slapping Joe on the back. "I never would have thought she could have such force behind her strike; she damn near took his head off! Man, I don't ever want to be on her bad side."

"Yes, she's a survivor, tougher than you think," said Joe solemnly. Then he turned to Stu and smiled, "... she really did look like some kind of a wild woman when she jumped him, didn't she?" They all broke up and laughed at that remark. They were all still laughing when they came out of the forest at the base of the mountain and made their way to the ranch house.

None of them noticed a lone man hiding in the brush. He waited till they were off the mountain and entering the town before he made his move. *Dixon needs to know about this*, he thought to himself. He never heard the cougar creep up behind him; as he turned to leave she barred his way. Her first strike was his neck, rendering his vocal cords useless. As he lay dying he could have sworn he heard her hiss; *not to my brother...*

“Stu, why don’t you come with us,” Joe called to him, “I’m sure Millie kept some late supper warm for us.” Stu would never presume to include himself by going to Joe’s without being asked; it was just the way he was.

“Sounds good Joe, don’t mind if I do.” Stu answered quickly accepting.

They came in and removed their coats; rubbing their hands together they went and warmed up by the fire. “Getting colder and colder after the sun goes down,” remarked Joe, “looks like it’s going to be a real cold one this year.”

Millie came out and greeted everyone with large glasses of whiskey. “I figured you men could use this about now. Supper will be out in few minutes. Oh Joe, the doc wants to see you when you have a chance.”

“Is he finished already?” Joe jumped up and Millie nodded, “I’ll be right back guys.” Joe put on his coat and turned to her, “Millie would you be a dear and see that my bed has fresh sheets on it. I’m bringing her here to recuperate.” He turned around and left and headed towards the doctor’s house.

“Well, I’ll be!” exclaimed Mille. She looked towards Stu, “Stuart, is she the woman? The one he has been expecting?”

“She is indeed Millie; and he’s got it bad old woman.” Stu chuckled, “so I’d be, oh so sweet if I were you. Besides you’ll probably love her, from what I’ve just seen, she’s just as ornery as you.”

Joe’s mind was racing as he hurried to Doc’s house. A cold wind began to blow thru town and it easily cut thru Joe’s coat and chilled him to the bone. He reached Doc’s place and knocked once and opened the door. Doc and Adam were sitting by the fire talking.

Adam rose, “hey Joe, how did it go?”

“Adam, Doc,” he said nodding his head, “it went just fine. We cleaned it up and left no trace of their ever being here.” Joe looked at the doctor, “how is Victoria?”

“Come and sit by the fire Joe, here, have a drink.” Doc poured a shot of whiskey and handed it to Joe. Joe took it and came and sat down with the men.

“I removed the bullet in her thigh and I think there will be no permanent damage. She took an arrow in her back shoulder. I got the arrowhead out and did my best to clean out the wound. She lost quite a lot of blood, Joe. I think the wound may be infected, she has a high fever.” The doctor’s brow furrowed as he continued, “I gave her something to calm her. Joe, I don’t have any antibiotics, not even penicillin. I don’t know what else I can do.”

Joe stood up, “where is she?”

The doctor stood up and went to a hallway, “She’s in the first room on the right Joe.”

Joe went down the hallway and opened the door on his right. It was a small hospital ward with four beds. Each had a small table and a chair by it. Joe stood there looking at Victoria. *She looks so small lying there. She’s so pale. My God, she took a hell of a beating.* He went over to her and pulled the chair close to the bed. He lifted the blanket and slipped his hand in hers. She squeezed it almost immediately.

“Victoria, I’m here,” he whispered as he leaned towards her, “I’m here woman.”

“Joe,” a raspy whisper escaped from her, “is it really you?” She was trying to open her eyes, but she was still under the influence of the drug the doctor had given her.

Joe took her hand and kissed it, “I’m here... sush... don’t try to talk.”

She drifted off again and he could tell by her breathing that she was deep asleep. He touched her forehead and pulled his hand away quickly; she was burning up with fever. Joe got up and went back down the hallway thinking about all that had occurred.

As he came out into the room he looked at the doctor, “Doc, I want to move Victoria to my house. Will it pose a problem?”

“If I said no, you’d just do it anyway, wouldn’t you?” Joe stared at him iron-faced. “Well, if we put her on a stretcher and bundle her up real good, I see no reason why not.” He rose and went into his clinic and came out with a stretcher, “gentlemen shall we?”

They placed a blanket on the stretcher and then folded another and placed Victoria carefully on it and then folded the sides in cocooning her. They placed another blanket over her and the men put on their coats.

Adam had a very large brightly colored parka. Both men looked at him in surprise, “The natives made it for me,” he offered, “a little loud in color, but very warm; I rather like it.”

They carried Victoria to Joe’s house quickly as the cold wind was picking up. They took her straight to Joe’s large bedroom. A king size bed dominated the large room and a roaring fire was going in the fireplace. Lady Kate and Lady Ashley were waiting for them. Millie had put fresh sheets on the bed and a large comforter. Joe and the doctor removed the blankets from Vicky and Joe got his first look at her wounds. He gritted his teeth and gently lifted her and placed her in his bed. Kate took over and shoed everyone but the doctor out of the room. She and Lady Ashley cleaned Victoria up, wiping away the dried blood and dressed her in some pajama bottoms.

“Will she be alright Doctor?” Kate asked as they went about making her comfortable.

“Time will tell Lady Kate, I just wish I had some antibiotics,” the doctor told her, “she has a high fever and I have nothing to counteract it.”

Kate remembered the pharmacy in the warehouse and told the doctor about it, he was overjoyed. “You and I are going to take a ride in the morning, doctor.”

Out in the living room the large wolf rose and slowly made his way to the door. He turned to Adam and let out a low whine. Adam immediately went to the door and opened it and allowed the wolf to go to his mistress.

Kate came out of the room, and looked at Joe. “You can have ten minutes with her, but no more Joe; she really needs to rest.”

Joe smiled at her and went into the room and closed the door. He went over to the side of the bed and went down on one knee; taking her hand in his he watched her sleep.

“Victoria, I am so sorry I wait so long,” he said in a low voice, “why didn’t I come after you sooner?” Duke came over and nudged Joe and whined softly. “She’ll pull through boy; she’s made of tough stuff.” Joe stroked the large animals’ head.

Vicky opened her eyes, “Joe? Oh Joe, you’re here... you came for me...” she drifted all again.

Joe stood and leaned over the bed and kissed her on the forehead, “yes, and I always will.” He quietly left the room and as he shut the door he saw the large wolf jump up on the end of the bed and lie down.

He was feeling much better as he came into the living room.

“Where’s that food you promised us Millie; I’m starving woman!” he said in a robust voice.

They all adjoined to the dining room and Millie was soon very busy bringing large amounts of food to the table for hungry group. Daniel filled Kate in on all that had taken place. She was amazed at Vicky’s brazenness and strength of will.

“She was mad as hell at what they had done to her Lady Kate,” Joe offered. “Stu and I were at the front of the cave, we saw the look on her face.”

“She scared the hell out of me!” Stu blurted out and they all laughed.

“You know,” Adam began, “I’ve been thinking about something. Daniel, what if I can get some of my friends to spy on those marauders up in Montana? I mean we could get a pretty good idea of what they are up to; and when they begin to move out.”

“Good idea Adam,” answered Daniel, “we could also find out just what kind of weapons we will be facing. I don’t fancy going up against tanks and RPG’s.”

Daniel suddenly went quiet and stared at Kate. Steve explained to Joe that they were probably communicating with Jake.

Daniel interrupted the conversation, “news from Jake guys. The group watching over Dragons Hill has been neutralized; they won’t be spying on anyone ever again. Jake says that they recovered some paperwork and plans in their camp. He wants me to look at them when I get back.”

As they finished eating, each began to feel the effects of all they had been thru. The initial rush of adrenalin had finally worn off, and they were all very tired. It had been a long and trying day.

“I think we can call it a night gentlemen, and ladies,” Daniel said. “We will think clearer after we all have a good night sleep.”

“I’ll do a quick walk thru the town before I settle in Joe; don’t worry about a thing right now.” Stu said on his way out the door. Joe thanked him, as he didn’t want to leave Victoria’s side.

“Joe, I’ll check in on Vicky during the night,” Kate offered.

“No need Lady Kate, I’ll be with her,” Joe said quickly. “I’ve slept on the floor many times before, and it will not be a problem.” And then he added softly, “Besides, I promised I wouldn’t leave her alone.”

Kate told Daniel about the doctor’s need for medicine and his fear that Victoria had developed an infection. He agreed with her that a quick run to the warehouse was in order. They would leave first thing in the morning. When he came out of the room the doctor was thrilled to learn that he would get to ride on a dragon the very next day. Millie cleared the table and Kate and Ashley helped. Everyone else said their goodnights and retired to their rooms and homes.

Kate came out of the kitchen and saw Joe sitting by the fire, sipping a small glass of whiskey. Her heart went out to him, knowing what he was going through. She gently put her hand on his shoulder, “You love her, don’t you Joe?”

Joe looked up at her and smiled, “yes, yes I do, Lady Kate. You know, I never needed anyone in my life before; I was always so self-sufficient. And then this spunky woman comes out of nowhere and walks across my heart. She’s been in my thoughts and dreams ever since the celebration at Dragons Hill.” He looked at Kate and sighed deeply, “I could see a future with her by my side.”

Kate smiled, “Joe, she’s done nothing but talk of you. She also believes that you both have a future together. She was coming to you to find out if you cared for her the same way she felt for you.”

“I intend to show her just that Kate,” Joe smiled up at her, “and much more. Now you must get some rest too,” Joe said rising, “off you go. Good night Lady Kate and thank you.”

Duke lifted his head as Joe entered the bedroom, acknowledging him. Joe went into the bathroom and showered. He changed into some pajama bottoms and a tee shirt, and made a pallet on the floor in front of the fireplace. After checking Vicky he settled in for the night. He was bone tired, and fell asleep almost immediately. His dreams were filled with future events that he would remember when the time was right.

Duke liked this strong man; he cared deeply for his mistress. He would make a good mate for her. Duke waited till Joe was asleep and then he came over and lay down beside him. *Yes, he would be a very good addition to their pack.*

Duke woke about four in the morning; Vicky was stirring and calling out. He began licking Joe's face, to wake him. Joe sat up quickly and looked towards Vicky. She was moving her legs about mumbling, trying to rise up. He went to her quickly and tried to comfort her.

"Easy girl," he said softly trying to push her down. "It's ok Victoria, you're safe." She fell back on the pillow and reached out for his hand, "I'm here woman, and I won't let you go."

"Joe, I was... I was so scared!" She began to cry, "Oh Joe... hold me Joe, please hold me," she cried.

"Oh baby, you're hurt really bad; I can't move you," Joe told her tenderly, "but I can hold you a little."

He went around to the side of the large bed and climbed under the covers and scooted over to her and curled himself around her. He placed his arm across her and cupped her gently, placing his other arm around her head. He leaned in close to her and whispered, "I've got you Victoria, your safe here with me."

Vicky leaned towards him and cried her heart out. All the pent up emotions she had felt came flowing out. In her fear, she sought refuge in Joe's arms. They fell back to sleep together and that was how Kate found them the following morning.

She discreetly backed out of the room and smiled as she closed the door.

Kate went into the dining room and put on a pot of coffee. She then heated some water and poured herself a cup of tea. Daniel joined her and she filled him in. He smiled and said he was glad it was over and they were together at last.

Kate and Daniel heard Jake calling to tell them. *We have worked thru the night my Lady. Lady Victoria's fever has broken and I believe that she will recover; she must rest and sleep now.*

Thank you so much Jake, Kate answered, and please, thank all your dragons for me for their hard work.

A few minutes later, Joe opened the door and came shuffling out rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "Good morning you two," he said yawning.

“Good morning Joe,” Kate called to him, “Jake just informed me that Vicky’s fever has broken.”

Joe smiled as he wrapped his robe about him, “Is there nothing that the dragons can’t do?” He grabbed a large mug and poured himself a cup of coffee. “Victoria’s fever has indeed broken and she is resting quietly now.” Joe put his mug down and took Kate’s hands in his, “Kate, uh sorry, Lady Kate...”

“Oh please Joe, just call me Kate,” she said smiling, squeezing his hand.

“Kate,” he bowed slightly, “I can’t thank you and Daniel enough for what you’ve done for Victoria. I will forever be in your debt.”

“Oh Joe,” she replied, “We are all family here; if one is in danger, all are in danger.”

“That’s right Joe,” added Daniel, “you’re one of us now.” Joe was surprised at the statement and yet grateful that they considered him family.

They had just finished breakfast when Stu came in smiling, “Good morning everyone! Joe, the town is up and running just fine; everybody is where they are supposed to be. No worries today man.”

Joe stood up, “well I’d better get some clothes on.” He bowed slightly to Kate, “If you’ll excuse me for a moment, Kate, Daniel.” He left them and headed for the bedroom.

As he opened the door Duke came out and went to the front door and scratched. Stu went over and opened the door and let him out.

“Man, that is one beautiful animal,” he said with admiration as he watched him pass by.

Joe changed into his customary jeans and shirt and boots. He checked on Vicky and then came out to join the others. He invited Daniel and Kate to come along and take a good look at his town and people.

“I thought you might like to see what we have done here. Victoria will in all probability sleep thru the day.”

Joe further explained that he couldn’t just sit around waiting; he had to get busy doing something or he’d go mad. They understood and agreed to join him. They quickly got dressed and everyone grabbed their coats and headed outside.

Stu brought the buggy around and Kate climbed up, “It’s been ages since I did this. Oh Daniel this is really sweet.” Stu helped Kate settle her self and then did the same for Lady Ashley. He took the reins, whistled once and the horses took off.

Daniel quickly asked to see his herd of cattle. Adam wanted to come along also and asked Joe if it would pose a problem. Joe thought for a moment and said that was a distinct possibility that he might spook the herd. So Joe saddled up horses for Adam and Daniel, and led Molly out for himself.

The three of them quickly joined up with Stu and Lady Kate and Lady Ashley. The town was abuzz as they passed thru, everyone waving and greeting them warmly. As they rode along, Joe pointed out the different areas of the town.

“We found an old-time printing press and one of the men has almost got it up and running. It is very small and breaks down continuously. We’re going to try for a small one-sheet newsletter to start.”

They passed a beautiful little house set off by itself, and Adam remarked how much it looked like an English cottage. Joe laughed and said, “That is Miss Gloria’s house.”

“Who is Miss Gloria?” Kate asked innocently.

“Let’s just say Miss Gloria keeps the lid from blowing in this town.” Joe raised his eyebrows and smiled continuing, “There are not enough women to go around, and she um, makes things pleasant for the men.”

Kate blushed red and asked, “You have no problem with the others? I mean in their treatment of her?”

“Hell no, she provides a needed service. After all, there are 72 men in this town, and not nearly enough women. She keeps things from blowing up. And, she is treated with the same respect as any other businessperson. That is something I insist on; there will be no rash judgments or name-calling. We all work together in my town.”

“Bravo Joe,” Daniel replied, “good for you! That’s the way it should be.”

They left the town behind and came to a small rise. As they reach the top Daniel and Adam could see the pasture on the other side spread out before them. It was lush and green, and there was a large herd of cattle grazing over the land.

“Whoa! I didn’t realize that your herd was so large,” Daniel said enthusiastically. “How many head do you have now?”

“The herd numbers 76 right now,” Joe said proudly, “but come spring there will be a lot more, that is, if they survive the winter. That’s my main worry now. Winters are very harsh here on the plains, and I know we will lose some.”

Daniel complimented him on his ambitious endeavor. It was obvious that he had worked long and hard on this project.

“You guys want to see our pride and joy?” he asked smiling. “Follow me!”

He took off at a dead run and they followed. As they came over a small rise they saw a field below separated from the main herd. And in the middle of it was the largest bull either had ever seen. He was grazing nonchalantly as three cows stood nearby.

“Gentlemen, meet Casanova; and believe me, he earned his name,” Joe laughed heartily. “This gives new meaning to the word ‘stud’,” Daniel chuckled. “My lord man, he’s huge. Wherever did you find him?”

“Believe it or not, he found us. He wandered in by himself some years ago,” Joe explained. “Needless to say, we have kept him very busy, and he seems to like it here.”

Daniel looked about the pasture and saw several riders, but not nearly enough for a herd this size. “Looks like you could use more horses and riders, Joe. Maybe we could scout the land and try to find some more horses for you.”

“That’s why Victoria was coming to town. She has a magnificent stallion, we were going to breed him with the mares I have here.” Joe looked back towards the town, “I don’t know now. I haven’t given it much thought lately.”

As they watched Adam dismounted and flew to the field and approached the bull. “You know, he is a marvel to watch.” Joe commented with awe, “I can never get enough of watching him soar out over the land.”

Adam returned a few minutes later and he was laughing. “You’re bull is extremely happy to be here, Joe, but he fears that he will not be able last much longer. The females are giving him no rest, and his great size requires that he have some down time.” Adam laughed for a moment, “he says that if he should die, he will die a happy bull.” At that all three men burst out laughing.

They returned to the house and the doctor went with Kate and Lady Ashley on Daowyn to the warehouse. His excitement at flying on a dragon was so overwhelming that Daowyn had to calm him down. The doctor inspected the small pharmacy and they all returned with the proper medicines. He gave Vicky some pills and came back several hours later and checked on her and said she was doing very well. He explained to Joe that she should rest to regain her strength; her recovery would be slow as there had been a great deal of trauma to her body. Joe assured him he would look after her properly.

During the evening couples came by the ranch house and offered their help to Joe. Each expressed concern for Lady Victoria’s welfare. He thanked them all for their concern and asked for their prayers for her swift recovery. Both Kate and Daniel were impressed.

And then a beautiful woman knocked and came in. She was impeccably dressed in a brown pantsuit that showed off her curvy figure; her soft blonde hair was accented beautifully by the color, and her makeup was flawless. She went directly to Joe and he rose in surprise. She expressed her concern for his ‘Lady’, and offered any help he might need. He thanked her for her offer, but said all was well. He saw Daniel and Kate’s interest so he introduced her.

“Daniel, Lady Kate,” he said very formally, “may I introduce Miss Gloria.” She made a slight curtsy to both and nodded her head.

Kate was very gracious, and engaged her in conversation. Miss Gloria was sweet and obviously very intelligent. After a bit she excused herself and said she must be on her way. She just wanted to drop by to let Joe know she was concerned for him and his lady. After she left Joe seemed relieved.

“Your townsfolk care a great deal for you, Joe,” remarked Lady Kate.

“We are a tightly knit group. We have all been through a lot to get to this point. Yes, they are all good people,” Joe said with obvious pride.

Both Kate and Daniel smiled. This was a good man who cared for his people. That’s what made him such a good leader. It is times like this that tests the mettle of people; and the strong come forward to lead the weak. Joe was definitely one of the strong ones.

“We will have to address the problem of the marauders soon. We need to come up with a plan and put it into action before the thaw begins this spring,” said Daniel somberly. “But first, Vicky needs to recover and we need to get your defenses in a tighter group around your town.”

They talked late into the night, each giving thought to what they had to do about the marauders. Everyone was too tired to think straight and at a call from Jake to leave it till morning they finally called it a night. They said their good nights and everyone retired for the night. Stu saw to it that guards were posted; and all was soon quiet in the town.

Joe entered his bedroom and made ready for bed. He sat and watched Victoria for a bit and then retired himself. He was asleep in minutes as he was totally spent. The large wolf came over and lay down by his side, on the pallet on the floor. He slept deep and hard; his subconscious filled with hope for the future.

Just as the sky was making it self ready to receive the sun's first rays, he turned over and awoke. He heard the hawks outside calling as he lay there. He was going over everything that had happened the previous day. He heard Victoria stirring and he sat up quickly. She was trying to rise up and he got up and went to her.

“Easy Victoria, you should lie still,” he said softly, “your wounds will open again.”

She opened her eyes and smiled at him and he melted before her gaze. She raised her hand and gently stroked the side of his face. She tried to speak but her throat was dry and nothing came out. He quickly poured her some water and gently raised her up so she could drink.

“Thank you Joe,” she said softly. He placed the water glass back on the nightstand. She took his hand and held it to her chest. “You came for me Joe, you came for me.” Tears of gratitude cascaded silently down her cheeks.

“Don't cry Victoria,” Joe was at a loss, he didn't know what to say, “It's over, and those men are gone Victoria; you are safe here.”

“These are tears of relief and joy, Joe. I was so afraid I wouldn't ever see you again. To be here with you now,” she gently touched his face again, “is more than I hoped for.” She leaned towards him and cupping his face in her bandaged hands, kissed him softly on the mouth. “Oh!” she said as she felt her swollen lip.

Joe was dumbfounded; he smiled and told her, “You've been banged up quite a bit woman. You have a split lip, and a nasty black eye. You took a bullet in your right thigh and an arrow in your left shoulder.”

“Is that all?” she asked and then attempted to laugh, but that hurt her lip too and she winced.

Joe laughed for her, “I think it's quite enough, don't you? We are here now; the rest will just have to wait.” She gazed into his eyes and he sighed deeply and slid his arm around her.

“I thought you were lost to me Victoria,” he sighed deeply, “I felt a cold place start to form in my heart when we heard what happened. I know this isn't the right time, and all that nonsense, but I don't want to wait a second more. I can't chance losing you again. I care deeply for you Victoria, and I want to live my life with you by my side; I know love will follow.”

“I can't think of anything I want more Joe.” As she leaned forward and reached for him the covers fell away.

It was only now that she realized that she was swathed only in bandages from the waist up. Her face turned red and her eyes were wide in embarrassment as she quickly reached for the covers.

“My sweet lady,” he told her gently, “there is not an inch of you that I haven’t seen in the past 24 hours, but I understand.” He squeezed her hand and got up.

He went to his dresser and pulled open a drawer and picked out one of his white tee shirts and tossed it on the bed. He gently helped her put it on cringing when she would wince at the pain. He went around the bed and climbed in scooting over to her and curling himself beside her. For several hours they lay there talking softly. Joe told her everything that had happened since she was taken. He told her about what had occurred at her old town, and the attempt to spy on Dragons Hill. She was amazed at the effort that was put into finding her; she was very grateful.

Suddenly her stomach growled loudly and they both laughed at the sound. “Joe I am suddenly starving,” Vicky said, “I think I could eat a bear!”

“Well, we’ll just have to do something about that,” he answered quickly. “I can have Millie fix you something right away.”

“I think I’d rather get up and try to move about first.” She ran her hand thru her hair, “I must be a mess.”

Joe got up and reached down and retrieved her bag of clothes and placed them on the end of the bed and opened the bag for her. She slowly sat up on the side of the bed. She reached for Joe’s arm and stood up, by the side of the bed. A little woozy, Joe put his arm around her and she leaned on him to steady herself. She reached into her bag and pulled out some underwear and lounging pants. She grabbed her toiletry bag and tried to make for the bathroom. Joe took her things and placed them on the counter and then helped her to the bathroom. She cleaned herself up some, brushed her teeth, pulled her hair back, and made herself much more presentable. She looked at herself in the mirror and saw her black eye and cut forehead; *oh I am quite a mess*. She came out of the bathroom to find Joe placing her things in the dresser drawers. He had moved his things to the large 6-drawer dresser by the opposite wall. He turned when he heard her and smiled at the change.

“You’re beautiful,” he told her smiling like a love-struck schoolboy.

Vicky walked up to Joe and looking up at him smiled as she leaned into his chest. Joe held her to him just happy in the feel of her. He leaned down and kissed her gently, and the effect was immediate. The both of them knew it wouldn’t be long before they were together.

Joe cleaned himself up and then offered to carry her out to the living room. Vicky insisted on walking saying that she needed to toughen up her leg. Joe agreed with her logic and helped her limp out into the living room. He led Vicky to the large chair by the fire. Duke came to her side and buried his large head in her lap with a low whine. Joe watched as she gently stroked him.

“I’m so proud of you Duke,” she praised him. “You came and got help just in the nick of time. Thank you so much my friend.” She slipped her hands around him and hugged him to her; then she bent and kissed his head.

Joe went to the kitchen and came out with some apple juice for her. He had put on a pot of coffee and knew the others would be up soon also. Soon the aroma of fresh coffee was wafting thru the house. He sat and filled Victoria in on who was still at the house and told her all about Millie. He was just glad that she was alive and with him.

Kate and Daniel rose and came out still in their bathrobes. Upon seeing her up and around they went to her quickly asking how she was feeling. They sat and spoke with her for a few minutes before Steve and Ashley came out of their bedroom.

Ashley rushed to her side quickly gushing, “Vicky! Oh you look so much better. We were so worried about you.”

“I’m fine Ashley, honest, thanks to all of you. I can’t believe that you all went to so much trouble to find me; but I am glad that you did. In fact,” she said looking at Joe, “I couldn’t be in better hands.”

The front door opened and Adam walked in, seeing her up and around he smiled, she looked at him and blurted out, “You too!”

Adam smiled, “Your friend there,” he said pointing to Duke, “told me where they were keeping you. So we went and got you and brought you home.”

Vicky looked at them all and smiled, “I can never thank you all for what you have done for me. But know this; you are all in my heart and prayers.” She looked at Joe and nodded and he come to her side and took her hand. She slowly rose and stood by his side.

“Friends, thank you all for everything you have done these past few days. It was a nightmare there for a while, but things are right again. I can never thank you enough.” Joe held Vicky’s arm and began. “On a much happier note, I would like announce that Lady Victoria has consented to become my wife.”

The entire room erupted in congratulations for them both. As all this was going on, Millie stood in the background watching with tears in her eyes. She was happy for Joe; he deserved to be happy. But at the back of her mind was the fear that he would no longer need her services, and she had nowhere to go. A man couldn’t have two women running his household.

Vicky saw her and slowly made her way over to her. Joe had told her all about how he found Millie; Vicky quickly guessed what she was thinking. She wanted to make a friend of Millie; mainly because of what Joe had related about her.

“You must be Millie,” she said coming up to her and taking her hand. “I do hope that you will stay here with us. I’m really a terrible cook, and I don’t see how I could possibly run a house this size. Besides Millie, you’re family; and family should stay together.”

Millie burst into tears and hugged Vicky. In that one sentence Vicky had put her fears to rest, and had told her she was family; something Millie needed to hear.

“Ah child, I wouldn’t leave you two to this house,” she said dabbing at her eyes, “I know it too well; and besides, you and Joe will have enough to do running the town.” She hugged Vicky again and whispered, “Thank you!”

Joe was pleased to see them get along; he knew he couldn’t abandon Millie and he was sure that Victoria would want her to stay anyway.

Four weeks later found the town of Evansville preparing for a celebration. Joe and Victoria’s wedding would bring guests from Dragons Hill and Dragons Bay. Everyone in town was in a gay mood. After struggling for so long and enduring many hardships, they finally had some good to look forward to.

Vicky had spent the four previous weeks recuperating from her wounds; and regaining her strength. Joe had been gentle and solicitous with her. And Millie was like an old hen looking after her. She had begun to take small walks around the house and then to the barn to see Samson. The great stallion was happy to see her again, and when she led him to the pasture he frolicked and ran about like a colt.

After the first week Joe had taken her around town introducing her to everyone and showing her all they had accomplished, she was very impressed. She made instant friends with everyone, especially Miss Gloria. She found her to be a direct and honest person, and she had a wicked sense of humor that Vicky loved. They hit it off right away and were soon seen together about town.

Several weeks later, it was Miss Gloria who stood at the door of the Town Hall greeting everybody as they came in for the wedding celebration. She spent the evening in the company of dragon riders from all over the country; and quickly became the darling of all.

The large pasture at the far side of town was awash in dragons, much to the surprise and joy of the children and young adults among the population. But it was Jake that Joe and Vicky were waiting for. As he and his Queen flew over and landed, Joe and Vicky made their way to the field. Kate and Daniel were waiting for them when they arrived. Both bowed to Queenie and thanked her for coming. And then they turned their attention to Jake.

Bowing Joe thanked him for everything he had done for Vicky. *I know we couldn’t have succeeded without your help Jake. I can never thank you enough.*

Vicky threw her arms around Jake and hugged him and thanked him personally. *I owe my life to you Jake. And also thank you for Joe; I know it was you who saw us together first. Thank you for arranging for us to meet.*

I can see how happy you both are; you shine brightly with it. That is all that matters. Go and enjoy your celebration.

Jake shot a flame into the air and roared ‘Approval’ loudly, much to the delight of the nearby children.

The celebration lasted late into the night, music could be heard echoing throughout the valley. There was much laughter and dancing. Had anyone listened they would have heard a large cougar howling at the sounds in glee for its human friend.

The newly married couple slipped away near midnight and returned to their home. There Vicky and Joe finally cemented their relationship and Joe found a sense of contentment he had never known.

STRATEGY

Three months later Jake called for a meeting with the heads of all the towns near Dragons Hill. Dragons and riders were sent to all the towns with the request, they returned two days later to pick up the leaders and bring them to the mesa.

The large Riders Hall was made ready to receive them. Most of these men had never visited Dragons Hill, only heard about it from the Town Criers. And few had ever met Jake. This meeting would 'kill two birds with one stone', so to speak.

Daniel and Joe met them all when they arrived and put them at ease. They had all heard of Joe and his heroic fight with the marauders. Most knew of his reputation for being a fair person to trade with. All were impressed with Joe's familiarity with many of the riders and their dragons. Joe explained that they would all meet in the Riders Hall, and the riders and their dragons would be present. Even with this knowledge they were still unprepared for the immensity of the large cavern; and so many dragons in one place clearly intimidated them.

Daniel stood and called them all to order. "Gentlemen, gentlemen, please gather around. Jake has called you all here for an important reason. As you are all aware, the marauders will soon be on the move, and your towns will be the prime targets of their attentions." He looked at all of them, "You have all read the Dragon Chronicles, so now I ask all of you; do you give permission for Jake to speak with you in your mind."

All nodded assent and Jake now rose to his full height behind Daniel and all eyes were on him. There were many 'Ah's' from the group of men.

Good morning gentlemen, I am glad to see you all. We have a very unpleasant task before us. The marauders will be on the move within the next several weeks. We must prepare a proper greeting for them. They will try to sack each of your towns for food to supply their army; we must deny them this action. I propose that each town is to have two dragons and their riders for protection. I also propose that we store any extra supplies of food and arms here in Dragons Hill until we know which way they are headed.

There was an immediate uproar from the men.

That's impossible!

What you are asking is unheard of...!

What about our people, they will need all the supplies...

Quiet down! All heads turned as Joe stood. Have you no idea of what is at stake here?

His voice boomed, echoing in the large cavern.

We will be fighting for our very survival! These men are animals they will give no quarter to any man, or woman for that matter. I don't know about all of you, but I put my faith in Jake. I will not lose all I have worked for to the likes of those vermin. Joe paced back and forth for effect. My men are driving my herd of cattle here as we speak. I prefer to fight to save what we have here. If you cannot, then you don't deserve the title 'leader'.

Jake continued. *Thank you Joe, but these men must make up their own minds. Now to continue, all of your people will be relocated to other areas where they will be safe. Each town will have only fighters in them willing to give their all to protect what we have here. Joe is correct in one thing; these marauders want only to destroy and kill. They must be stopped here and now, or we will never know peace again.*

Daniel stepped forward. *We would like you all to return to your towns and tell them everything that was said here. Ask for fighters to step forward. You will all return here in three days with them and they will begin their training. The rest will be relocated to safe areas; this is not up for discussion. Our future is in the balance here and we will take every measure to ensure that the women and children are protected. We have to take a stand now, or be destroyed.*

Jake continued, *when the marauders start to move we will have a better idea of where they will strike first. We have many spies bringing us word of their strength and weapons. We will be ready for them. Each of you must ask yourselves, which is more important; our future in peace, or your lives in slavery. If you are not willing to fight for what you have here, then there is no future. Make no mistake, these men mean to kill you and take everything you have. There will be no bargaining with them. If you think so then listen to a report we received just recently.*
Jake turned to Daniel, *please continue Daniel.*

We recently learned from a survivor who managed to get away exactly what these men are like. The name of the town was Batesville; notice I said was - located in Montana. The town leaders were afraid of the overwhelming force they saw coming and figured they could reason with these people. So they decided to make a deal with the marauders leader, Dixon, in hopes of saving their people. You don't make deals with the devil, gentlemen. Daniel looked about the room. They were promised they would be safe; assured all would be free to leave; all they wanted was the food supplies. This Dixon made only one demand - all weapons were to be laid down. Now Daniel's voice became deeper and louder. These fools convinced the rest of the town to lay down their arms; their only defense against these killers. When they came into town the first thing they did was line up all the males, and shot them. Then they took the women, and you can guess the rest. There was shock reflected on the faces of the gathered men.

Stuart stood up and stepped forward, commanding as always, he looked at each and every one of them. *I don't know about any of you, but I would rather die a free man than live my life with them in charge; or worse, be shot down like a dog. This is a time for courage, for men to take a stand.*

**He looked about the room and then turned around and stepped to Jake's side.
*I stand with Jake.***

With that Jake lowered his head and gave Stuart a 'nudge' in thanks for his confidence. The surprised man was flabbergasted, a first for Stuart. Several of the town leaders present got up and joined Stuart at Jake's side. Their decisions were made out of loyalty, and past associations with Dragons Hill.

A break was called for lunch, and a very somber group followed Daniel down to the Great Hall. Sam had sandwiches prepared along with tea and water. There were muffled conversations at all the tables. The group from Sandstone seemed a bit standoffish, sitting by themselves.

“What do you think Joe, will they actively participate?” asked Daniel.

Joe watched them for a few minutes, “I think most will jump right in, but Sandstone isn’t going to lift a finger. Victoria was right about them - they have no backbone!” Joe’s voice betrayed his disgust. “They’re looking for an easy way to handle the situation... the damn fools!”

“They are going to pose a definite problem if they think like that. We may have to save them in spite of themselves, Joe,” Daniel said half-heartedly. “Discuss no plans in front of them Joe; the less they know right now, the better.”

Just then Victoria walked into the large Hall, Joe watched her with appreciation for her grace and beauty. “Ah, now there’s a beautiful sight,” he sighed.

Victoria went to the Rider’s table and was greeted warmly by Lady Ashley and Lady Kate. The Sandstone leaders looked up in surprise to see her here.

Daniel remarked, “It seems our cowardly friends are taking an interest in Lady Victoria too.”

Sam called across the room to her, “Lady Victoria, will you be staying for lunch?” Vicky nodded and Sam brought out a tray for her.

The elders of Sandstone watched all this with growing rage. It appeared (to them) that she was upstaging them. She was always trouble the pompous men agreed, never knew her place. Their leader, a man named Richard, got up and haughtily went over towards her.

“Vicky! So this is where you have been hiding,” he said snidely, “you need to get back where you belong.”

“Where I belong?” asked Vicky cheerily, “and where might that be... Dick?” She emphasized his nickname. Joe quietly came up behind the man unseen.

“You and that mangy horse and flea bitten wolf belong in Sandstone,” Richard said dryly, “you need to know your place.”

“I go where I want you sanctimonious coward,” Vicky spat out, “and you will address me as Lady Victoria.”

Richard attempted to reach out and grab Vicky by the shoulder all the while saying, “just who the hell do you think you are...” he stopped short when he felt Joe’s iron grip on his wrist.

“I’d advise you not to touch my wife sir,” Joe said in a tightly controlled voice filled with rage.

Richard’s eyes were big as saucers as he realized his mistake.

“As to her name,” replied Joe coldly, “Jake himself calls her Lady Victoria. I’d advise you do the same sir, as you apologize for your rudeness.” Joe’s face was stone and Richard knew he was in trouble.

Red-faced, Richard quickly apologized and stressed her name, “Lady Victoria, I am truly sorry for the misunderstanding. Please forgive my rudeness.”

“Perhaps you should return to your friends... Dick,” said Vicky icily, “while you still can.”

Richard all but ran back to where he was sitting; he was rattled, but filled with rage at his treatment. “That little upstart, she’s always been trouble; never knows her place. Well she’ll get hers soon enough,” he hissed. “They’ll all get what’s coming to them!”

Sitting at a table behind him, Stuart’s sensitive hearing picked up the veiled threat. He noted the vehemence in the man’s voice, and the hate. He was quite concerned and immediately went to Daniel and Joe and related what he heard.

“What do you suppose he meant by that?” Stu questioned aloud, “It sounded as if... aw... you don’t suppose that he went ahead and made a deal with those devils, do you?”

Daniel looked concerned, “Maybe we should have a little talk with this Richard; like at about ten thousand feet.” Both men laughed but Daniel was seething inside; he relayed all this to Jake.

Jake was quite concerned to learn that one of the town leaders might be a spy and in their very midst.

Daniel, I believe we should have a private talk with this creature. Ask Joe if he would like to join us in this endeavor.

All the town leaders were returned to their prospective towns during the afternoon. Upon landing they all received verbal orders from the dragon rider on behalf of Jake; all except the town of Sandstone. The other towns were instructed not to discuss any of their plans with the Sandstone leaders; and they were informed why.

Joe and Lady Victoria were persuaded to spend the night at Dragons Hill. Lady Ashley kept Vicky very busy helping with the delivery of a foal by Jasmine, one of the Arabians. After much trouble and a great deal of worry on Lady Ashley’s part, Jasmine delivered a beautiful golden female with the best attributes of Samson, and the spirit of the Arabians. She was on her feet almost immediately.

Joe and Daniel stayed up late into the night talking. Both agreed that the Librarian needed to pay a visit to Sandstone.

That evening, after closing up his general store, Richard started walking to his residence. He was going over the events of the day in his mind.

Those fools up there on Dragons Hill think they are better than everyone else. They think they know everything; well, they are about to get theirs. And after, I will be put in charge of their camp. And the first thing I am going to do is teach that little upstart a lesson. Her smart mouth will be licking my ass for a long time.

Not hardly... Dick.

“Who said that?” A shaken Richard stopped short and looked about wild-eyed.

Nothing; it was probably just the wind blowing, he told himself. There was no one around; everyone was in his or her homes.

I'm just a little jittery, my nerves are completely frayed. All this silly business is starting to get to me. Ah well, it will be over soon, and I won't have to kowtow to those riders anymore. Admittedly they are a whole lot better than the black devils, but they make themselves to be such big shots. So they can fight those dragons - big deal. There are easier ways to settle disagreements; careful negotiation and compromise is the key.

Negotiate what... Dick?

Diagrams of Dragons Hill... Richard stopped mid sentence and looked about, “whose there, where are you?”

No sound, nothing... but he had heard a voice. His fears were getting the better of him. He backed up, looking around and then he began to run down the street wildly looking about, and up. He cut across a field and was almost at his home when a large black claw came out of nowhere and plucked him up. He closed his eyes tightly waiting for flames to hit him. Instead he was tossed on a grassy field in the middle of nowhere. He immediately curled himself up in a ball, expecting blows to reign on his body. When nothing happened he slowly stood up and looked around.

No one is ... wait, who is that out there?

Off in the distance he could see two men coming his way.

They were walking at a deliberate almost military pace.

They were dressed in black; it was so dark he could hardly make them out clearly.

He called to them... no answer.

They kept coming at that damn deliberate pace.

As they got closer he could see them clearer.

One had a long thin sword in his hand, and the other was holding a machete.

Richard was starting to get concerned.

He called out again... still no answer.

They just kept coming towards him.

He began to back up, all the while calling out in a plaintive voice.

Why won't they answer?

**Then Richard remembered and thought wrongly;
*Wait, wait, of course- they're the men I'm suppose to turn over the diagrams to...***

Wrong... Dick.

**Richard screamed and tried to run but he found his legs wouldn't work.
He saw the two men still coming his way.
As they came over the last rise he lost control of his bladder.
He called out to them again... nothing.
The closer they got the more he knew he was going to die.
They never said a word, just went to work.
He begged, pleaded, and finally promised them anything.
They continued in silence.
He told them everything he knew, and more.
He cried like a little boy.
Somewhere along the way Richard discovered that he couldn't feel anything any more.**

**Then he screamed out that there was a spy in Dragons Hill.
That he didn't know who – only that it was said they would never suspect...
Then he begged them to finish it...
They did.**

Six hundred ninety-three miles north-northeast of Dragons Hill, as the crow flies, a woman stood in a doorway in the small town of Walkersville. She appeared much older than her thirty years. Dark circles under her eyes and a skeletal frame from lack of proper food will do that to a person. She watched wearily as the animals ate. She preferred to call them animals; they certainly weren't men anymore. They didn't act like men, so why not call them what they were... animals.

Miranda was tired, bone tired; she had been up for 24 hours straight, cooking and cleaning up after the pigs. And then just when she thought she could get some rest she had been taken to a house and 'used' for several hours by three of them. She was tired and weary, and just didn't give a shit any more. *Maybe I'll get lucky, she thought hopefully, maybe they'll kill me too.*

And all of a sudden the memory came flooding back in. *No! Not again...* Unbidden, it came quickly filling her mind again. *The other women were free of them now, especially the young girls. Oh no, no, put those thoughts away, don't remember...* But try as she might she couldn't stop the sound of their screams from echoing in her mind. She was filled with rage and also horror. *God, I wish I were a man; I'd kill the bastards myself.*

She slowly backed into the kitchen and went to the sink and began washing the dishes. If she could just keep out of their way maybe she could get some rest. She began thinking again how all this began and she shuddered. Why had they listened to Franklin; why had they just sat back and let them come in; why hadn't they fought for their lives. She finished the dishes and was working on the silverware when she became aware that someone was watching her. *Oh shit! Not again?*

Dixon had silently come into the Kitchen and stood there watching her for a long time. She was different from the rest of them; he could tell right away. But he couldn't put his finger on what it was that gave him that feeling; she stayed in his mind, like a temptress. She would bear watching.

Mmm, he thought, she isn't that bad looking. Her short hair and her regal bearing gave her the appearance of a Nubian princess. Skin smooth and honey colored and dark brown defiant eyes. Yeah, he liked her defiance. She had a nice figure, full and rounded, and she wasn't a bad lay, after she was overpowered. She was a feisty one; maybe he'd keep her for himself for a while. He saw her reach up and wipe her forehead with the back of her hand; damn, she looks like she's gonna drop.

That's right, keep staring you fucking bastard! Miranda thought to herself. *One of these days you're going to get what you deserve. I just pray I'm there to see it.*

"Go back to your cell when you're done here bitch; you look like hell," he said roughly. "We can't have our best girl dying on us now, can we," he sneered. "No one will bother you for a couple of hours, get some rest, I'll give the word." He came over to her and touched her ass. "I'll expect a little nicer treatment from you next time for this favor.

She pulled away from him and continued what she was doing. She heard him leave and let out a long sigh of relief, *oh thank you God... I thought he was going to make demands again.*

She hurriedly finished the dishes and made her way back to her small cell. On her way she saw the one they call Cricket approaching. (*oh no!*) He was a certifiable nutcase; he liked to hurt the women, really hurt them. He gave her the creeps.

“Well, what have we here,” he said dripping with venom, “maybe we can have a little fun...”

She hated him more than the others, so she took great joy saying the one thing she knew would stop him. Miranda spat the words out and held her breath, “Dixon ordered me to rest. You can take it up with him if you want me to come with you.”

That put an end to it; Cricket stepped back cursing and walked away. No one crossed Dixon, not if they wanted to live.

She arrived at her small room and was thankful that she was allowed a door that locked and a window that opened. It was very small, but she was grateful for the cot and the blanket. She fell on the cot and lay there as her body relaxed. She just hoped that she didn't have those crazy dreams again. After a few minutes she drifted off into an exhausted sleep.

She became aware of the cool wind blowing across her body; it felt so good – so clean. She was standing on the hill again; all around her beautiful green grass was blowing in the wind. She had been here many times before. She watched as the waves of green flowed about her. She took in a long deep breath and reveled in the clean fresh air and the slight smell of sweetness. She loved it here; it was calm and beautiful, and so safe. And then that voice spoke to her again. Strong and firm, always assuring that he would protect her.

Miranda, have you thought about what I have told you? Do you believe me when I say that I can help you?

Yes, I, I think I do. But please be patient with me; I am so very, very afraid. She began to cry. Who are you? How do I know I'm not just making this up, that I'm not just slowly going insane?

I shall prove to you that you can trust me. You know the one called Cricket, the one who likes to hurt you? Miranda nodded in her sleep. Tomorrow he shall be removed; he will never hurt you again.

The next morning Miranda awoke feeling very rested, as a matter of fact, she felt great. And she remembered her dream; more important, she remembered the promise her unseen savior had made. Miranda thought about it long and hard; she remembered the man who had passed thru their town a year ago. She remembered the tale he told. *Could it be...?* When she reported to the kitchen she saw there was a flurry of activity. Inquiring what was going on, one of her fellow prisoners told her that the man called Cricket was missing. They had searched the town and the surrounding area and no one could find him. Dixon was livid, ranting and raving at everybody. Miranda silently went about her chores the rest of the day; inwardly she was smiling at the knowledge that her secret savior was real after all. He had made good on his promise. For the first time in the many years since the burning, Miranda felt a sense of hope begin to take hold.

Daniel and Joe met early in the morning before sunrise at the Great Hall and ate a quick breakfast. They quickly headed up the Hill and went directly to Jake. They came out on the mesa just as the sun was rising. Joe held his breath for a second at the sight before him. There was Jake, head bent facing the sun. His size was overwhelming, but to Joe, what was imprinted on his mind was the fact that Jake was kneeling; at least he appeared to be kneeling. Praying was the word that leapt into his mind.

What you have just seen keep to yourself Joe; Daniel told him, few are privileged to see it. Consider it an honor to the trust Jake has in you.

Jake rose to his full height and turned to face the men. He seemed to glow with the sun at his back. Joe was beginning to realize the full potential of the mighty dragon, and quite possibly who had sent him. Both men came forward and bowed slightly before him.

Good Morning gentlemen; I hope your evening was fruitful. The mighty dragon looked at both men knowing full well what they had done the previous evening.

Daniel spoke first. *Very fruitful, Jake, you were right about Richard. He planned to sell us out. He was going to hand over diagrams of Dragons Hill. And another thing Jake; just before the end he said there was a spy in Dragons Hill. He didn't know who it was but he did say that we would never suspect.*

I am already aware of that Daniel; I already know who it is. Jake chuckled for a moment and then continued, *we will take care of our spy when the time comes.*

You know! Shouted Joe incredulously, *Jake, why didn't you tell us? Is it one of us, or one of my men?*

Joe, calm yourself, it is not a human. Jake lowered his head to them both. Daniel and Joe looked at each other puzzled. *I am aware of this Dixon's abilities, and know who he sent to spy on us. Jake was very matter of fact about the whole situation; he turned to Joe and continued. Joe, your cougar friend is keeping careful watch on this creature. When the time comes, she will prevent it from reporting to Dixon. She is very grateful to you for saving her life; and also for releasing her back to her forest.*

Joe was speechless at this information. He looked at Jake and then Daniel shaking his head.

No good deed goes unpaid Joe. Jake told him, *In your compassion for the cougar cub, you made a lasting friend. Even though you cannot communicate with each other, she knows what is in your heart, and she considers you family. Unknown to the both of you, there was a seventh man on the mountain that night. He was well hidden and saw all that took place. When he tried to leave she saw to it that he did not report back to this Dixon. She went to Adam with the news of what she had done and asked if she could be of service. She considers you a brother, and she will not allow anyone to harm you and yours.*

Thank you for telling me Jake, Joe smiled at the memory of the little cub he had found, I see her every now and then and it makes me feel good that she is free to roam the hills. I had no idea that she felt grateful.

Now to business gentlemen, Jake headed off to the Riders Hall with the two men following.

Jeffery was waiting for them when they entered the Hall. He had a series of maps laid out on the large stone table in the center of the room.

“Ah Daniel, Joe, good to see you both; I have here,” he indicated the maps, “the location of several armory’s that we can make use of. I assumed you would want weapons Daniel to fight our enemy. With your approval, we can go and retrieve them. What do you think?” Jeffery smiled, waiting for an answer.

“Good thinking Jeffery, I had planned on asking you for this information. You saved us some time. Yes, I suggest we gather the Dragons and several trailers and fill them with arms and ammo.” He turned to Joe and continued, “Joe, I was thinking of using your town as a training ground. You have the best men qualified to train our army, and the lay of the land will suit our purposes. Will your people mind being relocated?”

“Most of them will stay to fight, Daniel. My town is made of sturdy people who don’t take lightly to being threatened.” Joe thought for a minute and continued, “We can build a couple of large barracks to house all the fighters. Nothing fancy, roof over their heads and cots to sleep in, but that should be enough.”

“Good, I knew I could count on you Joe,” Daniel said forcefully.

Just then Steve and Jerry made their way into the Hall. “Morning folks,” said Steve good naturedly, “what are you two up to? Planning a surprise for our expected company?”

“Jeffery was just showing us the location of several armories. We’ll need guns and ammo to train our army if we hope to succeed. We’re going shopping gentlemen. Jerry,” Daniel said turning to him, “I’ll need you to gather the C4, if we find any. And maybe come up with some surprises for the advancing force.”

“Surprises are my specialty Daniel,” he said grinning and raising an eyebrow, “you should know that by now.”

Jake, who was keeping pace with all this now intervened for a moment, *Jerry, could I have a word with you? I have a few ideas I’d like to run past you.*

***Sure Jake,* “see you guys later,” he said waving and heading off with Jake to a side alcove.**

Steve whistled, “When those two get together it can only mean trouble for the enemy.”

“Steve, I suggest we weld a tee bar on two more trailers down at the warehouse.” Turning to Joe, Daniel asked, “Joe, you haven’t been there yet have you?”

“No Daniel I haven’t seen it.” Joe replied quickly.

Jake, would you please call Michael and Andrew to the mesa. And do you think that Daowyn would allow Joe to ride him? I need Joe with us on this. Daniel quickly asked.

Jake replied after a few minutes. *Lady Ashley has given her consent; Joe will have to ask Daowyn himself.*

Okay Jake, I’ll tell him, answered Daniel as he looked at Joe.

“Joe, how do you feel about flying a dragon yourself?” Daniel saw the surprised look on Joe’s face. “Do you think you can handle it?”

“Just tell me what I need to know,” he said smiling broadly.

“I figured you’d say that,” said Daniel chuckling. “There’s nothing to it really. But, you’re going to have to ask Daowyn yourself. Let me fill you in on Daowyn as we head over to the mesa.”

Daniel grabbed Joe’s arm and they headed out of the Hall. He told Joe about Daowyn’s prowess as a fighter; he also instructed him in the art of approaching the dragon and asking for permission to fly him for this mission. When they reached the mesa Michael and Andrew were already as were their dragons, Lady Jennie and Lady Ariel. Introductions were made and Joe was taken to properly meet their dragons. He thought to himself at how beautiful they were as he stood in front of Lady Jennie; Michael made the introductions.

Suddenly he heard in his mind the sultry voice of Lady Jennie, *We believe that it takes a high soul to appreciate our beauty. That you do so confirms what all we dragons have felt about you Joe, mate to our Lady Victoria.*

My Lady, you do me great honor,* thought a startled Joe, *to be in the presence of such beauty is a joy few men are granted.

***Oh you are a gentleman kind sir,* said a distinctly southern voice. Joe turned and looked into the large face of Lady Ariel, he bowed with a flourish to her. She laughed and gave him a slight nudge.**

“Well, now you’ve done it Joe,” said Michael in exasperation, “They are going to be fishing for compliments for the rest of the day.” Both men laughed, “You’ve made friends with two more dragons, Joe.”

Daniel called Joe over to a large forest green dragon waiting off to the side. “This is Daowyn, I’m sure you remembered seeing him during our fight to rescue Lady Victoria. You have not been properly introduced yet.”

Daniel went before the dragon and bowed to indicate he wished to speak with him. Daowyn raised his large head and looked at both men.

Greetings Daowyn, said Daniel reaching out for Joe, may I introduce Joe, mate to our Lady Victoria; he wishes to speak with you.

Daniel stepped back and told Joe, “You’re on your own now Joe.”

Joe looked up at the large dragon and swallowed hard. In his mind he thought quickly, *he is so big, no, I am not afraid. I trust Jake with my life; I have nothing to fear now.* He bowed low and began.

Daowyn, first I would like to take this time to thank you for all your aid in rescuing my Victoria from those monsters. I am truly grateful for everything you did. The large dragon snorted and keened a low humming, almost a purring sound.

As you know we are preparing for battle. We must train our new army and also supply them with arms. I humbly ask you to grant me a boon. Allow me to ride you so I may join Daniel and the others to retrieve these arms from around the country. Joe took a deep breath and waited.

Raise your head warrior, boomed a strong male voice in Joe’s mind, *look into my eyes.*

Joe did as directed. He saw great intelligence there and something else. There was a light, a bright shining light. Joe was suddenly hit with a blast of bright white light. He fell to his knees and slowly raised his head and looked up at the large dragon in surprise.

Daniel, Steve, Michael and Andrew were taken by surprise. This had never happened before and each was quickly asking their dragons what was happening. They were all told the same thing; “a warrior is being forged for battle.”

Joe felt himself rising up into the air. His mind was filled with strength, understanding, acceptance, and a portion of the knowledge Dragons’ share with their riders. He saw Daowyn as he truly was and it overwhelmed him. He was unprepared for the emotions that engulfed him. His instinct told him that this was an honor from the Dragons themselves.

We shall be linked as one from this day forward warrior. You shall ride me into battle and we shall be victorious over the vermin who call themselves men. How say you Joe?

I... I pledge you my loyalty, and all that I am; said Joe with tears in his eyes, *I won’t let you down Daowyn.*

Good! You are a true warrior, worthy of the confidence that Jake places in you. Worthy to be called Rider!

Joe was placed on the ground and Daowyn reared back his head and shot a flame into the air, followed by a loud roar. Joe stood below him with a silly grin on his face. The other dragons on the mesa joined in with loud roars.

Daniel came over to Joe and seeing the look on his face realized what must have happened. Jake quickly informed him that Joe had been accepted into their ranks as a Rider, for the duration of the battle with the marauders.

“Come on Joe, you need to come with us. You don’t know it yet, but you are about to be as hungry as a bear. Come on, come with us.”

Daniel and Steve led Joe down off the mesa, down the mountain and into the Great Hall. Sam was waiting with a large plate of food and drink. Joe sat in a heap still smiling, staring off. Daniel quickly brought him out of it by tossing a glass of water into his face. Joe sputtered and looked around; he got his bearings and quickly pulled himself together.

“Daniel,” he said looking at him, “you didn’t tell me it was so... so grand. I never guessed; it defies explanation.”

“Joe, what just happened here is between you and the Riders of Dragons Hill,” Daniel stared into Joe’s eyes, “do you understand? You have just been given a singular honor, it has never happened before.”

“Daniel, don’t worry, I’m not a novice at keeping secrets, you know.” Joe took Daniel’s arm and shook it, “I have to say that I am overwhelmed. It totally defines what ‘friendship’ really means. I feel so... so honored, almost euphoric.” He slapped Daniel on the back and laughed loudly. “Good lord I’m hungry!” he said as he attacked the plate of food. All the men laughed remembering how it was for them after enhancement.

They talked among themselves as Joe ate and made plans to leave around noon and go to the warehouse and prepare the two trailers. Daniel informed Joe that he would need flying clothes if he didn’t want to freeze up there in the heights. He also informed him not to worry about Lady Victoria, she and Lady Ashley would be busy with the horses for several days.

Joe went down to the horse pens and spoke with Victoria before he left. He told her not to worry about staying to help Lady Ashley. He would be busy getting things ready to receive the many fighters they were expecting. They would see each other in the evenings. She in turn told Joe not to worry about her; she and Lady Ashley would be very busy bringing the new foals into the world. He should go and take care of business. Unknown to Joe, Jake had already filled Lady Victoria in on the happenings and she was thrilled for Joe. But she also understood the need for secrecy.

Around noon they all returned to the mesa and mounted their dragons. Joe approached Daowyn smiling, he bowed slightly and said, *well my large friend, it looks like we begin. Guide me if I do this incorrectly.*

You shall do just fine Joe, look and see how Daniel mounts our Queen. See where he seats himself, simply do the same. Joe noted where Daniel sat and where he put his feet upon mounting. He did the same and was soon sitting on the large dragon’s back.

The five dragons took off and Joe was in heaven. The feel of the power of the dragon under him was mind numbing. He now appreciated the efforts of the Riders even more. As they flew to the warehouse he got a better view of Dragons Hill, and saw many areas they could use for ambushes if the enemy made it this far. They landed and went to work immediately. By nightfall the two trailers were ready.

They decided to stay the night in the town and leave in the early morning to scout out the armories. They would stay at the Riders House. All were surprised to find their Ladies had arrived earlier and had a large meal waiting for them in the Riders House. The night was spent with music and laughter and camaraderie.

After everyone had retired, Joe tossed and turned but could not get to sleep. He was too excited, he got up quietly so as not to wake Victoria. He went downstairs and out the front door. He stood there on the porch watching Daowyn among the many dragons asleep on the large front lawn. His mind was filled with all that happened. He quietly walked out to the large dragon, careful where he stepped so as not to wake the other dragons.

What troubles you, my friend, he heard Daowyn ask.

Not troubled Daowyn, reaching out his hand he asked, *May I touch you?*

Lowering his head Daowyn answered, *Of course you may.*

Joe gently slid his hand over the ridges on Daowyn's large head. Suddenly he threw his arms around the dragon and hugged him tightly. He held on, shedding tears of relief, and tears of joy. The large dragon knew what he was feeling and understood.

I don't feel worthy of this kind of honor Daowyn. I have done some terrible things in my life, all in the name of a country that no longer exists. And yet, I am happy that it has occurred. You have allowed me to see what all this is about, how a cleansing was needed; and how we can all live good productive lives. I promise I will try my best not let you down. Joe buried his face against the dragons.

Joe, my friend, said an understanding Daowyn, *you were chosen for the very reason you say. You understood before others what was happening and why. You showed compassion and fairness; yet when strength was called for to deal with those who would destroy others, you rose to the task. In a softer voice Daowyn continued, In our joining I saw into the heart of your being. You are a good moral man, Joe. Accept this small token of ours and join with us to put an end to the evil that has gripped the souls of those who would do us harm.*

I accept your gift Daowyn, he said raising his head and looking at the large dragon, *I will not let you down.*

They stayed together till early light talking with each other and bonding strongly. Their friendship would be a strong one - unique in dragon history.

Miranda went into the planning room and began picking up dishes and glasses and mugs. She held a large tub in her hands and placed them all in it. It was her job to clean up this room when the men left. She quickly went about her chore keeping her eyes cast downward. She scanned all the maps on the table and the places marked on them. She made a mental note of everything. Miranda had a photographic memory, and she was sure her secret friend could use the information. She never hesitated as she went about her business; she wanted no one to guess what she was doing.

As she lay on her cot that evening her mind went back and she remembered the man who had passed thru their town many months ago. He was on his way to Billings to see if his family had survived. He told them about the battle between the dragons. He told them about a mighty dragon called Jake. This dragon had saved many people and had righted the wrongs done to them. His lands were safe and peaceful. Miranda thought to herself, *My God! That is who is calling to me; it has to be!*

As she went sleep she brought up all those markings on the map in her mind. She had been doing this ever since her savior had removed the one called Cricket. She drifted off content that her secret friend would find the information useful.

Miranda was back on the hill and the feel of the wind blowing around her was so refreshing. She waited to see if her friend would call to her; she had so much to tell him.

Miranda, do you now believe me. The strong voice asked her.

She smiled and answered right away. *Yes, oh yes I believe you. And I have some information for you. Look into my mind; see the maps and the markings on them. I saw this today when I was cleaning up their meeting room.*

Very good Miranda, but you must be very careful. Dixon is no fool; he will guess soon that there is a spy in his midst. You must not put yourself in danger.

He will never guess it is me. I am very careful, and it gives me great pleasure to know that I may in some small way help to bring him down.

Do you know who I am Miranda?

I think so, but I'm not sure, if I say you may laugh at me.

Say what is in your heart Miranda, I will not laugh.

All right, but it may sound strange to you. I think you are... a dragon. Not like the others, a good dragon. I think you are the one they call Jake. And I think there are more of you. And I think that you are trying to put an end to these monsters, man and beast alike.

You are correct Miranda, how very intuitive of you. Jake continued stressing; now you must hide this thought in your mind. Do not think about it again, Dixon might be able to sense it in you.

Can you take me away from this place?

Soon Miranda, very soon I will come for you, until then be very careful child.

Thank you, oh thank you so much.

Two blocks away Dixon was in a foul mood. He had just received a report that his men had not checked in for over a week now. This did not bode well; he knew in all probability they had been found out and dealt with. Just how much information they had revealed did not bother him. He never told them his plans, only what they were to do; so he felt relatively safe in the fact that his true plans were still safe.

Damn it, that Jake has a hand in this, I know it. He thought to himself. He's got to have someone on the inside here. I know all my trusted men; they would die before giving any information. No, it has to be someone I would never suspect – but who? I'm going to have to keep an eye out, see if I can figure out who's supplying that bastard with information.

He slammed his fist on the table.

Well it will do them no good; we leave in a couple of weeks. Then we will put an end to this Jake and his dragons. My surprises are almost ready; we'll take down those dragons and then plow thru their so-called army.

Daniel, Joe, Steve and Michael and Andrew stood on the front porch of the Riders House. The map was spread out before them and they were going over it.

“Which one should we try first,” said Daniel looking at the other men.

“Daniel, my team and I know of a place near White Sands,” offered Joe. “It’s underground, in one of the empty missile silo bunkers. Few knew of it; it was one of those last resort areas. We may still be able to get in there.”

Daniel looked at the map, “It’s not marked on the map.”

“It wouldn’t be, only a few of us knew about it,” replied Joe earnestly.

“Gentlemen, what do you say,” asked Daniel, “do we go with the map, or try Joe’s armory.” All agreed, to go with Joe’s place. For some reason Daniel felt uneasy.

They mounted their dragons and Joe took the lead. Daowyn told Joe to think of the location in his mind and he would be able to find it. As they made their way across the land they saw several areas where the people came out and waved to them. It made them all feel good that they weren’t afraid of them anymore. About an hour later they could see the approaching desert. They came over a large sand dune and Joe began to descend. They landed on a flat plain leading to a small mountain. They dismounted near a tin shack.

“This is it,” said Joe. “Inside that shack is an elevator; it has its own generator. It will take us down forty or fifty feet into a large cavern. That’s where the arms are stored.”

“Let’s take a look,” said Daniel walking towards the shack.

The men went to the shack and opened the door; the inside was sandy and full of cobwebs. Joe went over to a sidewall and moved a piece of tin from the wall. There was a keypad.

“It needs a code to operate it,” asked Steve, “will it still work after so long?”

“Sure, I told you it had its own generator,” said Joe entering some numbers. “Simplest code there is: 1-2-3 to go down and 3-2-1 to come back up.” He grinned.

They heard a metal scraping sound, then a low humming. Suddenly the back wall began to shake, and then it slid to one side revealing the inside of an elevator.

“Hidden wall, damn!” said Steve surprised.

The five men got in the elevator and the door slid shut and they began to descend. Five minutes later the door slid open to reveal a huge lighted cavern. There were row and rows of arms and ammunition, all stored on wooden pallets.

“Son of a bitch!” exclaimed Michael as they stepped off the elevator. “Hey, it’s cool down here.”

“Will this be enough for what we have planned,” asked Steve of no one in particular?

“It’s a start,” said Joe looking around. “Enough for a small army, but we are going to need a lot more if we plan to stop them for good.”

“Okay,” whispered Daniel. He looked around and then said, “Jake says we load up everything in the trailers, and then we go to the next one. We don’t want to be lacking firepower when they make their move. Joe,” Daniel called to him, “are there any flame throwers here?”

“No, not here,” answered Joe quickly, “maybe in the other bunkers.”

“Steve, you and Michael and Andrew go and get the first trailer and load up everything here you can.” Looking at Joe Daniel continued, “Joe and I are going to scout out the other armories. Keep in touch.”

“Right,” answered Steve, “I’ll let you know when we’re finished here.”

“Good.” Turning to Joe Daniel continued, “let’s go Joe.” They headed for the elevator and were soon above mounting their dragons. “Now we try the Vegas site, for some reason we have to go there; can’t explain it, just a feeling in my gut.”

Daniel and Joe took off and headed west, northwest. They flew over the broken remains of what once was Las Vegas. There was no movement below them. They didn’t expect any; this was one of the first places hit by the black dragons. They turned west and followed the map to an abandoned airfield. There were burnt remains of several jets, and a destroyed tower and hanger that had been shredded. Joe headed towards the hanger motioning Daniel to follow.

“There was always an entrance in the hanger,” he called over his shoulder. “We just have to find it.”

Both men began lifting the twisted tin slabs and moving them out of their way. Their dragons offered to help, but Daniel was worried about booby-traps. As they lifted a rather long piece of tin, Daniel spotted a wire.

“Don’t move Joe!” he shouted.

Joe froze as Daniel followed the wire to its source. It was a simple enough device and Daniel quickly defused it. The scare was close enough; now both men were much more careful in their movements. They concentrated on the area where Joe was sure there would be an entrance to the bunker. So engrossed in what they were doing, they never heard the boy sneak up on them.

“Don’t move,” yelled a shaky young voice. Both men froze.

Daniel, shall I teach this boy a lesson for you, asked Queenie quickly.

No Queenie, he hasn't seen you two yet. I think he came up from underground. We can take care of him. But I thank you for your gracious offer anyway. Daniel looked at Joe and made a signal with his hand.

Joe understood quickly and fell to his knees yelling, "No don't shoot me! Please don't shoot me!"

The boy's attention was momentarily distracted and that was when Daniel struck. He flipped the boy up in the air and took his rifle away from him in one fluid movement. The boy hit and lost his breath for a moment. He lay there on the ground looking up at the two men.

"That was pretty slick," he said dryly. "So now what, gonna kill me?"

"Why would we do that," answered Daniel, "we don't even know you."

The boy looked at the two men puzzled.

"We're not marauders son, we just came to get some ammo to fight them," Joe explained quickly.

"Well, why didn't you say so right away," the boy said in exasperation, "I could have killed you both?"

He stood up and told them he knew where the opening was; he'd been living down there ever since the dragons had fired the base. He and two other boys had been hiding there while the dragons attacked; they heard what was happening above them. After several days they came above, but they couldn't find anyone. So they had returned to the bunker.

"How old are you boy?" asked Joe.

"I'm sixteen, I think; I'm not too sure about the date." The boy scratched his head, "Sam and Billy are eleven and twelve. They're still below hiding."

Daniel looked at the boy and marveled that he and his friends were still alive. No wonder he had felt the urge to come here first.

"What's your name boy," he asked in a kind tone. "How have you managed to live out here all this time?"

"My name is David, sir," he answered a little hesitantly. "Oh we have plenty of food; there are crates of MRE's down there."

"My name is Daniel, and this is Joe. What if I told you we have a safe place we can take you, David?" Daniel put his hand on the boys shoulder.

“Really,” he asked in disbelief.

“They’re lying David!” A decidedly female voice shouted out, “don’t believe them; there are two dragons outside! Run David, run!”

The boy jumped but Joe held on to him. “It’s ok, they’re our friends.”

Daniel couldn’t see where she was, so he stepped out into the open. He had an idea that only the truth would work with this one.

“The silver one is called Queenie, she’s my companion.” He shouted to the back wall, “The large green one is called Daowyn, Joe rides him. They are our friends, with their help we managed to kill all the black dragons. We live to the east in a place called Dragons Hill with a lot of other people. There is a large force of marauders coming our way. We came here to find arms and ammunition, so we could fight them.” Daniel waited.

The girl was well hidden. She wanted to believe them, but so much had happened she wasn’t sure. *They haven’t hurt David, maybe they are telling the truth. Oh God, I don’t know who to believe!*

“David,” Daniel looked at him, “what is your friend’s name? Maybe we can convince her before she does something foolish.”

David sighed, “Her name is Amy... she’s why we’re still alive. She was a sergeant on the base here; she made it to the bunker and dragged us in; she kept us safe after they left.”

Daniel called out to her, “My name is Daniel, Major Daniel Sherman of Special Ops. I am asking you stand down soldier.”

“That won’t work on me,” she answered quickly.

“Daniel saw Queenie’s head rise over the rear wall of the hanger; *I see her, my Daniel, she is very frightened.*

***Hold there for a moment Queenie, maybe we can end this.* Daniel took a step forward and called out, “Amy, if we meant you any harm, that dragon behind you would have roasted you by now.”**

Amy spun around and looked up, her eyes flew wide in terror, she screamed, and fainted dead away. Daniel rushed to where Queenie indicated. Daniel lifted her up and carried her to Joe and the boy. Joe took his canteen and poured water on her face. She sputtered and sat up fighting them away from her.

“Who in the hell are you people?” She asked quickly looking around for the dragon.

“I told you the truth Amy. I can appreciate what you and the boys have been thru, but it is over now. You can come with us, and if you don’t like it, I’ll bring you back myself. You have my word.” Daniel smiled at her and she was taken aback by his gentle manner.

“You are telling the truth,” she whispered finally convinced.

“Now, why don’t you bring your friends up here so we can introduce all of you to our dragons? Dragons are sticklers about manners and polite behavior. I wouldn’t want my Queenie to think of you as a bunch of ruffians.”

“Dragons have manners,” she said sarcastically raising her hand to her head, “Oh I’ve lost it,” Shaking her head she turned and got a good look at Joe for the first time. “Holy shit!” she jumped to her feet and saluted sharply, “Sir! Sgt. Amy Hicks, reporting, sir!”

Joe stood at attention and returned the salute, “You know me Sergeant?”

“Yes sir; you reported in at our base in San Diego just before the Burning started. I was on orders to try out for your group in the Fall, I know all about you and your team sir.”

“Well then, believe everything Daniel just told you. It’s a different world now Amy, get used to it. Now, call those boys up here, they must be scared to death by now.” Joe ordered forcefully.

An hour later all four were standing between Daniel and Joe in front of the two large dragons. Daniel and Joe had inspected the armory, and sent word for Michael and Steve to come back with a trailer the next day and load up. Daniel gave the small group a short version of the last three years and then instructed them on how to approach a dragon in requesting a ride. Permission was given for the dragons to speak with them.

David and Sam were delighted, and bowed and asked for a ride from Queenie. They were thrilled when Queenie lowered her head and agreed, calling them young warriors. Daniel instructed them how to climb on and the boys were on her back before he finished. Grinning from ear to ear they sat there waiting for a laughing Daniel to mount.

Joe took Amy and Johnny with him and introduced them to Daowyn. Amy’s fear seemed to vanish when she heard Daowyn’s strong voice in her mind complimenting her on her care of the young boys in her charge. She did as instructed and helped Johnny do the same. Soon they were on Daowyn’s back with Joe in the lead seat. They rose into the air and headed back towards Dragons Hill. The boys were in heaven enjoying the ride as only young boys can. Amy was full of questions and kept Joe busy answering them almost the entire ride back. Finally Joe told her he would introduce her to Master Jeffery and he would be able to answer all her questions.

Daniel called ahead and relayed all that had occurred to Jake. The mesa was full of riders and dragons when they landed. As they dismounted they were all brought to Jake and introductions were made. The thrill of hearing Jake call them young warriors and welcoming them to Dragons Hill left them all with the ‘grin’ on their faces. They were taken below to the Great Hall and introduced to the residents of Dragons Hill.

The boys adapted quickly and were soon seen running all over the place. Amy found her way to Master Jeffery and questions began flying. He gave her a copy of the Dragon Chronicles to read telling her all her answers would be found in them. She read and reread, and two days later a different Amy approached Daniel and asked what she could do to help. He asked her if she would like to go to Evansville to help in training their army.

She quickly agreed and caught a ride with Joe when he returned there to check on things. She made a special effort to compliment Daowyn on his prowess and regal bearing. She received a nudge in return upon landing which thrilled her. Joe had kept Stuart and his men informed and up to date on everything that had gone on, so they were prepared for Amy's arrival. She was put in charge of the women's barracks and their training in the use of firearms. She was content in the knowledge that at last she could do something constructive to put an end to this nightmare.

All the residents of Evansville had pitched in and helped with building the barracks for the army they would need. They were simple buildings, enough to protect from the elements. The men and women who volunteered for the fight soon began arriving on the backs of dragons and in the specially equipped trailers. Training began as soon as a barracks was filled.

Amy trained her women well in the use of Crossbows and rifles. She had them work out constantly, teaching simple hand-to-hand combat techniques. She knew it could make all the difference if things got nasty. From her group she selected two women who excelled showed an expertise in being able to handle themselves. These two women were both quite tall, lean, and well muscled. She trained with them and taught them the use of another kind of weapon - a samurai sword. In the weeks that followed, she and they could be seen towards the back of the town going thru their moves with grace and precision.

Weeks later Joe called a meeting to see how everyone was fairing. He questioned his trainers on each of their groups. Amy offered that she had a girl who was extraordinary with a rifle, a real crack shot. Her name was Daphne, she was around 19, city born and raised. She had never shot a gun, let alone a rifle before in her life; Amy called her a natural and said she was a prime candidate for sniper activity. Daniel and Joe pulled her out of the group and put her with eight other men, much to her joy.

Jake had spoken to Daniel about an idea as to how to put these marksmen to use in a special way. They would ride the dragons with the Riders and pick off the leaders. Steve made a special rig for them to be placed on the dragon's wings, close to its body. Secure in the rigging, they could concentrate on the ground below and guided by the dragon's eyesight they would be able to pick off their targets easily. A test run was set up, and Amy's girl, Daphne, excelled beyond expectations.

Daniel complimented her on her ability; the giggly girl replied that she was just so happy that she could finally do something to help. She had felt useless before, and now she could actually be a real member of 'Jake's Army'. Daniel questioned her on this and was surprised to learn that all of the recruits considered themselves members of 'Jake's Army'. It was the one overwhelming force that united them all.

Daniel commented to Joe that they had been looking for something to unify their army, and it seemed that the recruits had come up with their own idea; which made it all the more significant.

So it was that Millie took a sheet and some scarlet material and made a flag with Jake's likeness. The recruits proudly flew it over the barracks in Evansville. By the end of the third week, 'Jake's Army' was ready and the troops were itching for a fight.

Several nights later Daniel called his squad leaders to the barn by his house. Joe, Stuart, Joe's men, and Amy came into the large barn together. They were surprised to see all the Riders gathered there also.

As Adam flew into the barn Amy grabbed Stuarts arm in alarm. He chuckled and remembered that she had not been told of Adam and was naturally taken off guard. Stuart quickly explained and she listened with wide eyes staring at the birdman. For the first time Amy really believed that the world had indeed changed. She stared at Adam with awe and admiration.

Adam tucked in his wings and took the floor with a report.

"My spies tell me that Dixon is packing up his camp and getting ready to move. He's leaving the tanks behind; for some reason they can't seem to get them to move." He looked at Stuart and smiled, "It was a good idea Stu, and it worked."

Stuart smiled nodding his head, and chuckled deeply, "Yo Adam."

Adam continued, "My hawks say that Dixon has some kind of secret weapon. He's keeping it well hidden, but they know the general area where it is located. The trouble is, Dixon has power over the vultures of the wasteland. Anytime my hawks get close, they attack. They have already lost five of their number; they refuse to lose anymore. We have tried mice, and even ferrets; none have returned. We're going to have to wait till they make their move."

Daniel asked, "Did they give you any indication of what it could be Adam?"

"All they said was a lot of wood was being sent to the area, Daniel. None of the people working on it were allowed back in the general population. They were being kept in a different area." Adam shook his head, "I'm worried Daniel, it could be something to hurt the dragons. My friends say that this guy is worse than the black dragons, he's a real nut case."

"Thank you Adam, for all your effort," Daniel said, "and please thank your friends for me and for Jake. And express our sympathy for their losses."

Adam took off and headed towards Dragon Hill.

"Friends, we have all been requested at Dragons Hill for a meeting with Jake." Daniel continued, "The Riders here have agreed to give you all a ride; by now you all know each other well."

There was a round of “yes”, and “Of course.”

Daniel called them to order, “Our sniper team is already with Jake; he had some extra training for them.” Daniel stood, “I suggest we head out now.”

“Amy,” Joe called to her, “you will ride with Stuart and me,” he smiled at her, “at Daowyn’s request, solider.”

She grinned at him, “Yes sir!”

Miranda rolled over and inched away from Dixon. He looked like he was passed out, but she knew better; she didn't trust him. She lay there wishing she had a knife; she would slit his throat in an instant. He had been extremely cruel these past few days and she didn't think she could take any more. She sat up and gathered her clothes.

God please let this be the last time; I can't take it anymore!

Suddenly Dixon sat up glaring at her, and then he did a funny thing. He gently caressed the side of her face, and murmured something under his breath. The moment didn't last but a few seconds and then he was his old self again.

"Go on, get outta here bitch," he slurred loudly and rolled over.

Two men came in and waited till she dressed. Her eyes moved all over the room as she slowly put her clothes on. She saw a rough sketch of something on his desk and committed it to memory; all the markings on the maps, and the sketches. When she was finished dressing she began crying for their benefit; they laughed and roughly grabbed her and took her back to her room. Neither one tried anything - they knew better now that Dixon had claimed her for himself.

She waited till they left and let go a deep sigh of relief and sat down. She didn't know how much longer she could stand having Dixon touch her. She got up and quickly grabbed her things and went down the hallway to the showers. She scrubbed her body roughly, wanting to get the smell of him off her. She dressed and came out of the bathroom and went back to her room, drying her hair. She lay down on her cot and tried to relax her body; concentrating on what she had seen in Dixon's room. She brought back everything, went over every detail, taking her time to see everything again in her mind. She came to his desk, saw the sketch lying there, and concentrated deeply to bring it into full view. A design of something made of wood, long platform on a rolling frame...

It's on a sharp angle, in an upward...her eyes flew open... oh shit!

She sat up in alarm. *Oh God, Jake has to know about this!*

She had to warn Jake, and quickly. She knew it would be dangerous to try to attempt to call him; but his life could be in danger. She lay on her cot and concentrated; she knew she had only spoken to him in her dreams, but just maybe she could speak to him awake also. She knew she had to try. She sent out the thought: *Jake? Jake, are you there?*

Dixon's brow furrowed as he stirred in his stupor and rolled over.

Far away on Dragons Hill Jake was watching his Queen and Daniel approach for a landing. Suddenly Miranda's voice reached out to him and he quickly picked up on her distress. *Miranda? Easy child, you will give yourself away.*

Queenie was just landing with Daniel and his group when Jake called to them.

Daniel, hold just a moment; do not dismount.

He listened again.

Ah... come, grab a crossbow and toss it to Stuart. We have a mission and I fear we may be too late. Daowyn, Joe, follow me quickly, I will explain on the way.

“Hang tight you two,” Joe yelled over his shoulder as Stuart reached out and grabbed the tossed crossbow from Daniel, “looks like you’re going along.”

Jake filled them all in on his contact in Walkersville, and the information she had been sending him. She was in a situation to be privy to the plans of their enemy. He explained how he had painstakingly cultivated her trust over the past previous months in her dreams. He did it this way so that Dixon would not pick up on it. She was in a very precarious situation and was now calling to him in alarm, awake. Jake feared that Dixon would pick up on it. She must have something very important to chance a call. They must hurry if they were to save her.

Jake flew to the thermals and was over Montana in a matter of minutes. As they came out of the thermals both Stuart and Amy were shivering. They came down in a slow spiral and the two warmed up a bit as they carefully made their way down towards the town. Both looked below and saw it emerge from the clouds like a spiral in a pinwheel.

Jake took the chance and called to Miranda. *I hear you child; I am almost there. You must go to the roof of your building now; I will pick you up.*

Dixon bolted upright.

He’s here!

He looked around the room, as though he were listening for something.

Fuck... It was that bitch all along!

He leaped off the bed, grabbed his guns and looked wildly about.

Screaming orders at the four men standing guard outside his room, he ran down the hall towards the stairwell.

Miranda, he knows it is you, Jake urged her further, run child, run to the roof!

Miranda ran out of her room, locking the door behind her. She took the steps two at a time all the way to the roof. She bolted out the door and turned and locked it. She looked up just as Jake soared by the roof. She took in her breath at the size of him.

Oh my God!

She spotted Daniel on his back waving at her to come to him; her eyes were wide with fear as she began to run.

Dixon ran up the stairs to her apartment and beat on her door. He ordered one of his men to kick it open. When he saw it was empty he screamed in rage. He turned quickly and made for the stairs screaming, “the roof you idiots, the roof!”

Jake stretched his wing to the roof and called to her. *Run onto my wing Miranda, Daniel will catch you. Hurry child they are on their way up the stairs, run.*

Stuart looked below and took aim at the door with the crossbow. He saw the woman bolt out the door and run towards Jake. Marveling at her athletic form, honey colored muscles bulging as she ran, she was beauty in motion to his eyes. He roused himself from his reverie and concentrated on what he had to do.

Miranda did not see Daowyn hovering over her, or Stuart aiming the crossbow at the door. She saw only Jake and Daniel and ran as fast as she could. She leaped onto his wing, still running like the wind stretching out her hand to Daniel. Just as her fingers reached his hand the door burst open and two men came out firing. Stuart took out the first man almost immediately, but the other one, seeing what had happened, jumped back quickly, still firing. Miranda lurched forward into Daniel's arms and Jake took off like a shot.

Daowyn then turned in midair and let loose a flame so hot it melted the roof and the top floor of the building. Sensing this was coming, Dixon had jumped down the landings quickly; two of the men with him were not so quick. As the two dragons took off they could hear him in the street below screaming obscenities at them.

Daniel felt the young woman go limp in his arms and checked her over calling to Jake as he did. *Jake I think she took a bullet. Yeah, she's bleeding from her thigh.* Daniel took off the rawhide band that held his hair back and tied it about the girl's leg for a tourniquet. Jake called ahead and had the doctor waiting for them with a stretcher when they arrived.

Miranda regained consciousness just as they were approaching Dragons Hill; she buried her head against Daniel's chest; "Don't let him get me, please..."

"Shhh... you're safe now woman, he can't hurt you anymore," Daniel told her with such confidence in his voice that she believed him.

Jake and Daowyn landed and all dismounted. Stuart came over to Daniel and he handed her down to him as he dismounted. Stuart carried her to the waiting stretcher but she became very agitated and would have none of it. She insisted that she had to speak with Jake; it was a matter of life and death. A temporary pressure bandage was placed on her upper leg and then Stuart led her limping over to Jake.

"You are all in danger, Jake," she tearfully said. Daniel stopped her and told her to think with her mind. Jake replied that due to the seriousness of the situation, she would be allowed to continue.

"Jake, these weapons were made to kill you and your dragons. They're like giant crossbows, and each has these huge wooden spears. He has them hidden all over - near here." She looked about at everyone, "You are all in terrible danger." She became woozy and Stuart put his arm around her to steady her as she continued.

“Jake, look in my mind, you can see them; and where I saw the marks on the map is their location.” She took a deep breath and suddenly said, “Oh my...” as her eyes rolled up and she fainted into Stuarts large arms.

Stuart took her down to the infirmary and the doctor checked her over. He removed the bullet from her thigh and said except for some malnutrition, she appeared to be in good health. She was placed in a cave with several other women.

Up above in the Riders Hall Jake scanned over Master Jeffery’s map. Relaying to Daniel, he pointed out the areas that Miranda’s mind had indicated, and Adam and Daniel studied the locations.

I am sure that Dixon will be moving them now that he has discovered Miranda’s duplicity. We must send some scouts to find out.

Jake, Adam interrupted, I believe this calls for some special help. I have asked the Himalayan Harpy Eagles to aid us in this battle, particularly in finding these devices. They are accomplished predators and can take out the vultures without any problem. They should be arriving with Valotin and his forces.

Thank you Adam for being so far sighted, Jake praised him. Now warriors, come closer, this is what I want you to do...

BATTLE

An hour before sunrise the next morning Valotin and his forces came out of the thermals and spiraled down towards Dragons Hill. The large dragon felt it prudent to arrive in the dark so as to not warn the enemy of their presence. As they spiraled down large birds could be seen taking off from the dragon's backs and swooping down towards the mesa. Adam stood off to one side near a petrified tree and the large Himalayan Harpies gathered about him. Jake, Queenie, and Rah awaited Valotin on the large second mesa that had previously been made for them.

Hail mighty Valotin, Fourth of the Ancients, welcome to Dragons Hill. Jake called in proper dragon etiquette, greeting him. Your forces are most welcome at this time. Hail Lady Valeria, my Queen is most happy you have come.

Hail Jake, First of all the Ancients; we are honored to be of service, answered Valotin in true dragon form.

James and Elizabeth dismounted, paid their respects to Jake and then were greeted warmly by Daniel and Kate. All of Valotin's riders dismounted and after proper greetings to Jake, they joined their leader, James. Daniel greeted each one, calling them by name.

Kate spotted Vail and Lady Amanda among the crowd and went over to them.

"Amanda," she said hugging her, "Vail, it's so good to see you. I see your leg has completely healed. You both look wonderful and happy."

"We are Kate," answered Vail smiling. Reaching out he pulled another couple over, "Kate, I'd like to introduce Seth and Lady Hannah."

Having already heard all about Seth, and the part he played in destroying NaTas, she greeted them both warmly. "Welcome to Dragons Hill, I hope you both enjoy your stay with us."

Daniel called them all together, "Riders, come," he said waving them all to follow. "We will all go below for a belated breakfast and I will fill you all in on what has happened here." They gathered together and headed below talking among themselves.

Up above Valotin and Jake were conferring on battle plans. Jake filled Valotin in on the latest information they had received from the woman called Miranda.

So this devil means to take us out in the old way, he commented. He will find it an impossible task as we have all been faced with it before.

Jake grunted, *If the Harpies can find the location of these devices, as Adam has promised, he said, then the threat will be removed.*

They are formidable allies Jake, replied Valotin. In the final battle with NaTas's forces they actually attacked one of his dragons en masse, and took it down.

I did not think that would be possible, said a surprised Jake.

They will accomplish this task easily; chuckled Valotin at Jake's response, those vultures have never faced an adversary like them.

Excellent Valotin, Jake answered, it must be accomplished quickly.

Jake stared at Valotin for a long moment and then said, between the two of us my brother; I believe that this creature has another plan in mind. I am certain that all this is mere window dressing to keep us occupied while he puts in play his true plan. He knows that he cannot defeat us in battle; I believe that he has other designs. Think Valotin, what sure way is there to defeat us, if not in battle.

Valotin thought for a bit and as the truth slowly dawned on him, he blurted out, No! He wouldn't dare!

Yes, I believe he would. Jake shifted his large body and continued. I ask a favor my brother; I wish to send all the women and children to Dragon's Bay for safety's sake - especially Kate. I know they will be safe there in the care of your dragons and riders.

Of course Jake, Valotin answered with concern. I will see to it immediately, they will be on their way by noon.

I thank you my friend, said Jake nodding his head to Valotin, and the sooner they are safely secured the better. Best not make too big a show of it when they leave.

Essex will look to them and keep them safe, Valotin proudly said, and Vail will keep them from worrying about the battle. The Shaman will put his people to watch over the children, they will be fine.

Jake felt better knowing that Essex and Vail would be watching over Kate and the other women and children.

We must send out your spies throughout the camp. They must use their skills to spot this Dixon and his cohorts before they do any damage. Now do you understand why I insisted Daniel ride me into battle?

Valotin shook his large head; this human, this...Dixon- he is truly lost, mad beyond reason.

Down in the Great Hall Daniel was filling the newly arrived Riders in on all that had taken place, beginning with Lady Victoria's abduction. He introduced Joe to them and explained that his town was being used to train Jake's Army. He relayed their battle plans and informed them of Adam's plans for the Harpies.

Vail stood and excused himself saying, "Terribly sorry ole boy, but Jake and Valotin are calling me to the top."

Vail and Essex received their orders from Jake and Valotin. Essex promised to keep a watchful eye out for any intruders. Understanding Jake and Valotin's concerns, Vail offered to leave in a quiet manner, so as not to attract any attention. One dragon at a time would leave the mesa in 15 to 20 minute intervals.

Daniel had already been informed of Jake's plans for Vail and Essex and he was secretly glad that Kate would not be here for the battle as he feared she would be a prime target. He had had a terrible time convincing her to go to Dragons Bay, and after several hours of arguing she had finally relented and agreed to go. It was one of the few times they had ever argued since their joining.

Kate realized that Jake was only thinking of her welfare; but that didn't mean that she wouldn't worry about Daniel and Jake while the battle waged. Daniel had placated her with the picture of her lying on a sandy beach 'soaking up some rays', and little Billy playing in the sand with the other children. She agreed only after considering that Billy could also be a target of this madman.

Lady Elizabeth and Lady Amanda were thrilled that the children would be at Dragons Bay for a visit. They would be well protected and both knew that the Shaman would deem it an honor from Jake that he would entrust the Lady Kate to his protection.

Daniel helped Kate with their luggage and also informed her that Lady Sally was bringing Oreo and Tabs along. The sun and salt water would be good for Tabs bones; he had never really healed well after the great battle and the warm sand would be welcomed. Kate was packed and ready to go. She didn't like the idea of being parted from Daniel for so long.

"Please Daniel, don't take any risks; I want you back, alive."

"I have Jake in my corner Kate, I'll be just fine. Don't worry woman, keep Billy happy and enjoy yourself," Daniel told her half-heartedly.

He looked at her and marveled at her beauty. Right now she was lovelier than he could ever remember. He kissed her and his son and hugged them tightly.

"Squeeze Daddy," laughed Billy. "Don't worry Mommy will be safe with me."

Daniel laughed at his young son and the serious tone to his voice, “I trust her to your care and protection my young knight.”

Earlier Kate had gone to Jake and asked him to keep Daniel safe. For the first time she was really scared. Just the fact that Jake was removing her from the battle told her how serious the situation was and she worried about the both of them.

Please Jake, let me stay and fight with you. Kate pleaded to her friend; you know I am not afraid, I feel like I am running away.

You are my rider and my friend my Lady, Jake told her; this creature means to kill you in order to get to me. I cannot do what I must if I have to worry about you. You must go with the other women and be safe.

In the end Kate relented and agreed with Jake, she must go. She and Daniel and Billy reported to the mesa. Lady Ashley joined Kate and they mounted Queenie, who was sitting beside Lady Elizabeth and her dragon, Lady Valeria. Little Billy was very excited and clung to his mother as they seated themselves.

As they took off Kate looked below at Daniel and Jake, she waved and blew them a kiss. “Be safe my loves,” she whispered.

Daniel went to the Riders Hall with the rest of the Riders. Jake looked at him and understood his feelings immediately; his Queen had also left with the women. He loved Kate in a way that Daniel could not; but he also loved his Queen.

Which of the women stayed behind Daniel?

Lady Beth insisted on staying, Jerry couldn't get her to agree to go. Daniel continued, Lady Victoria wouldn't leave Joe, she said he came for her, and she would be there for him. But we managed to convince the rest of them to go.

Good Daniel, it is less for us to worry about. Jake turned his large head towards the opening and listened, Ah, Daowyn has landed. Joe, Victoria and Stuart came into the Riders Hall, Daowyn was right behind them.

Jake began the briefing; Adam has reported that his Harpies were successful. The devices Dixon created are large crossbows. He plans on taking down a few of us, this will not happen. Rah, I want you and Lady Jennie to destroy these weapons; we now know their locations and the Harpies will direct you to them.

Daniel picked up the briefing, Elliott, Lady Dee, Lee Chin; we have need of your special talents. I would like you to go below and mingle with the townspeople. We are sure that Dixon has made his move by now. He is sure to be below with the various people we have here from the surrounding towns. Sam is the only one who knows what you are up to; so if you get any feelings let him know immediately.

All three nodded and bowed slightly to Jake and left the Hall. They immediately went to a cave that had been prepared for them and changed into clothing more apropos to a poor townsman. They entered the Great Hall where most of the people were one at a time and began to mingle with the various groups of frightened people.

Joe, are your people ready? Daniel asked already knowing the answer.

Joe smiled, we're as ready as we're ever gonna be Daniel; Jake's Army is itching for a fight. At the mention of that Jake lowered his head to Joe. That's what they call themselves Jake, their own choosing, Joe said with a shrug of his shoulders. The large dragons behind Jake chuckled.

Good, they are going to get one. The harpies spied a large force headed your way; they should be there within the week. Daniel informed them. I believe they will try to out flank you by sending a small force to your rear to pick off your leaders. Joe, you will appreciate this next bit of news.

Jake chuckled loudly and all turned to him, it seems that your furry friend had taken matters into her own hands, Joe. She and several of her friends will cover your backs. There will be no surprise attack from the rear.

Joe laughed; *it seems we have many 'friends' in this battle Jake.*

Jake turned to Victoria and continued.

And Lady Victoria, your friend Duke has been just as busy. He made contact with several packs of wolves and they have agreed to join the battle as well. When the devils pass thru the forest they will be met by a welcoming committee they will soon not forget. My dragons will fly above and give cover as best they can when the monsters attack.

Now we wait, said Joe solemnly. I will return to Evansville and make the necessary preparations and fill my people in on what to expect.

Lady Victoria, Jake said turning to her, will you do me a favor and stay here at Dragons Hill? I have a special task for you.

Taken off balance, Victoria answered, *Sure Jake, anything I can do.*

She followed Joe out to say goodbye, commenting that she had no idea what Jake wanted. Joe was grateful; he worried about her being injured in the coming fight.

"You just be careful Joe. Stuart," she said turning to the large man and giving him a hug, "don't let him take any chances."

"Don't you worry Ms Victoria, I'll look out for him; been doing it for years," she was lost in his massive arms as he hugged her back.

Then she and Joe faced each other. Staring into each other's eyes Joe took her hand in his and held it to his heart. They kissed long and passionately and then hugged each other for a long extended moment. Just as Stuart was getting uncomfortable, they released each other. Joe gently caressed the side of her face then turned and mounted Daowyn. They were off in a matter of seconds. Vicky watched till she couldn't see them anymore, and then she went back into the Riders Hall to Jake's side.

The large dragon looked down at her with love and understanding; *he will be fine Lady Victoria, I promise you. Now, I have a request to make of you, one which could prove to be very dangerous.*

Ask away Jake, Vicky quickly answered, you know there is nothing I wouldn't do for you.

I am counting on just that my sweet lady. Jake lowered his large head to Vicky and made eye contact.

Vicky immediately linked with his mind and quickly learned of all that had transpired regarding Dixon and Miranda. She saw what Jake was proposing and she agreed with his plan. It would be the only way to flush Dixon out, and make him reveal himself.

If he has seen one of the pictures of Lady Kate he will know I am not her.

Vicky looked up at Jake, *I mean Jake, my black hair is a dead give away*, she said as she ran her fingers thru her hair.

You will go the town warehouse with Michael and Lady Susan, Jake told her, she will show you what to do. From a distance you must look and walk like Lady Kate. Lady Susan will take care of the physical change and Michael will show you the rest. Trust in him Victoria; he will be your shadow from the moment you step back on Dragons Hill.

Jake, Vicky said a little apprehensively, you know this madman won't be happy when he discovers the ruse.

That is why you must convince him that you are Lady Kate. He will be looking at you with eyes filled with hate and madness. Hold yourself in righteous anger, he will believe it long enough to take you to the mesa top and confront me; that is the whole purpose of his plan. I am very sure that he will not do anything until his army begins its attack on Evansville. Jake snorted and blew a puff of smoke out of his mouth. Ach, this distasteful business gives me heartburn and upsets my stomach.

Jeffrey and Lady Susan came onto the mesa; introductions were made as Michael and Lady Jennie landed. Lady Susan and Lady Victoria greeted the beautiful dragon, and with her permission, mounted. Lady Jennie cooed and soon they were off, rising up and heading towards the town and the warehouse.

High in the Catskill Mountains a young man tossed in his sleep; fire and roaring was all about him; he cried out a name and then moaned with such sadness that his large friend was momentarily worried. Suddenly he sat up breathing heavily; small droplets of sweat glided down his handsome face. He looked about and then closed his eyes and buried his head in his hand.

You had that dream again my friend, said a gentle voice.

Yeah, it was particularly vivid this time Mariah; he said looking at her, *I wish I could put it to rest.*

She uncurled herself and raised her head saying, *I worry for you.*

The young man rose and limped to the pool of water at the rear of the large cave. He was used to his leg acting up in the cold weather. It had never healed properly; the result of an encounter with the black devils some years ago. He splashed some water on his face and rose and went back to this friend. On the way he bent down and picked up some wood and threw it on the fire.

It's getting colder, looks like one last cold front is moving in. Maybe it's time we head for the west. He bent over and propped up his sleeping mat. *Maybe your dreams are telling us something.*

The young man appeared to be in his early twenties; he was 6' tall, with thick wavy dark auburn hair, pulled together and tied at the base of his neck. He was well built, with a lean muscular body. A rounded wholesome face with a scattering of freckles across his nose and cheekbones belied his appearance. Only his deep brown eyes gave away the suffering he had seen; and the memory he couldn't seem to let go of.

Trey looked at his large friend and smiled, she was twenty-four feet of tightly packed muscle, deep dark red, almost the same color as his hair. Finding her had been the best thing that had happened to him. She was his only friend on this barren desolate world.

No!

He didn't want to remember any more.

What say we leave in the morning and head out west Mariah? Maybe your dreams are right; maybe there is more of your kind out there. He hoped his friend was right, that her dreams were telling her that there were survivors out there.

It's about time! I know that there is something that we must do; I just do not have the knowledge required. There is something missing, and I am sure that the answer lies in the west. The large dragon told him.

Well, we haven't seen any of the black devils for almost a year now. We should be safe, he told his friend, *besides if we run into any of them, you can handle it.*

You have much more faith in my fighting abilities than I have, my young friend, Mariah said blowing on him in a huff.

He laughed at her and then went and hugged her; a deep purring filled the cave. He gathered his sleeping mat and lay down leaning against her body. She curled herself around him and both were soon asleep.

Dreams came to them both telling of people and dragons in the west. And Mariah dreamt of Jake, the First of the Ancients; and of what she was lacking in knowledge. And on a side note something else... something that would affect her rider. She smiled in her sleep as Jake chuckled; her love for her rider was apparent. *He will be free of his guilt.* Mariah curled herself tighter around Trey and purred in her sleep.

The next morning Trey awoke in a particularly good mood, he packed and loaded his meager possessions onto his friend. They quickly left the confines of the mountains that had been their home for so long. Looking towards the west, Trey hoped they would be able to find others alive in this strange new world. Maybe then the dreams would stop haunting him.

Michael and Lady Jennie landed back on the mesa with a very changed Victoria. When they dismounted Jake bellowed approval at the change. Daniel, not told of the subterfuge, thought for a brief moment that Kate had returned. If one did not know Lady Kate personally, they would believe that the vision before them was indeed she. Jake complimented Lady Susan on the transformation.

A change of clothes and just the right application of make-up can change a persons appearance Jake, she smiled as she continued, add a wig similar to Kate's hair and her clothing and bingo; one Lady Kate. Vicky did the rest by herself. Jake, thank you for allowing me to be part of this, I am honored that you trusted me.

It is I who thank you Lady Susan for you have done very well.

Jake gave Lady Susan a gentle nudge and she spontaneously hugged him with love in her heart. *Now you must say nothing of this to anyone. Return to the Great Hall below and be safe. We will set the trap up here for our elusive quarry.*

Jake turned toward Lady Victoria, *from now on you will answer to the name, 'Lady Kate', my dear. Michael will set the trap by calling you from below. He will then climb the pathway and you will both go into Lady Kate's cave. You will remain there until Dixon shows up. Can you do this my young friend?*

Oh don't you worry, he'll believe! Thank you Jake for allowing me to repay you for all you have given me. Vicky threw her arms around the large dragon's head.

Now go below to your cave 'Lady Kate', and wait for my signal. Jake told Vicky, as soon as the ghosts have pinpointed Dixon, we shall begin the charade.

Victoria followed Michael down the stairs and thru the mountain to Kate and Daniel's cave. Michael told her to make herself comfortable and he left and went below to go about his duties.

Down below in the Great Cave, Lady Dee had zeroed in a man she believed to be Dixon. She had signaled Lee Chin and he made his way towards her. He could feel the hostility and negative aura of the man as he passed by. He greeted her as an old friend, happy that she was still alive. Dixon all but ignored them keeping his eyes on the entrance to the cave. They signaled Jake that they had their man. Now they were ready to start their play.

"I am so glad to see that you are alive, Dee. I searched all over for those we knew," Le Chin began.

"Yes my friend," added Dee quickly, "if not for Lady Kate I would have been lost."

Dixon perked up at the mention of Kate's name and he worked his way over near them and began to listen to their conversation

“She found me just in time. I tell you, Kate and Jake saved me,” she continued. “She lives above in one of the caves on the mountain.”

“Ah, she and Jake saved me too;” added Le Chin, “yes, we are fortunate to have such powerful protectors. I would like to thank her, but I imagine they are very busy right now.”

They walked away towards the serving area leaving Dixon to his thoughts. Unknown to him, he was being watched by no less than five pairs of eyes. His every move would be watched from now on.

Back in Evansville Joe was putting the finishing touches on the defense perimeter around the town. They were not yet paying attention to their backs, and the hill beyond. Seven men made their way to the hill with great stealth. Hand picked by Dixon himself, they cautiously made their way halfway up the small mountain. They carried rifles with scopes, shovels, and canteens of water. They spaced themselves out along an area about ten feet apart. They quickly dug foxholes and settled themselves pulling tree limbs and branches about them. Their task was to pick off the leaders and create havoc when the battle began.

They did not see the yellow eyes watching them as they prepared for the coming battle. They did not hear as more joined in watching them from above. They couldn’t possibly know that they would never fire their weapons. Surprise, and then fear, would be the last emotions they would feel.

Back at the perimeter, Joe and Stuart had been busy. They had the men erect a large 8’ chain link fence around the outer perimeter of the town. If the advancing horde wanted the town, they would have to bring down the fence. And they had several surprises waiting for those who attempted such a feat, on both sides of the fence.

“How many pits have your men dug up out there?” Joes asked adding, “They covered them so well that I can’t tell where they are.”

Stuart laughed, “They say they dug twelve of them spaced out all along the fence line. I took Duke with me to inspect them.” Stuart looked at a perplexed Joe and continued, “Well, I figured since his friends were going to be in the area, they should know where the pits are located. He pissed on each and every one marking them so they would know and steer clear of the area.”

“Of course, I’ve been so busy with everything I didn’t think. Thanks Stu, for thinking ahead, we wouldn’t want to lose any of them to the pits.” Joe put his hand on his friend’s shoulder, “I knew I had you around for something.” Both men laughed.

“Well Joe, we’re as ready as we’re going to be. Everyone knows their job; and the cattle are safe at Dragons Hill.

“If they breach the fence, Daowyn will fly over and flame them,” Joe said matter of factly, “That will keep them at bay for awhile I think.”

“Oh, before I forget Joe, I caught a glimpse of your furry friend this afternoon, near the house. She seemed to be looking for you.”

Joe looked at his friend and thought for a bit. “Really? I think I’ll go and see if she’s still there.”

Joe headed off at a run towards the ranch house. He went around to the back of the house, and looked towards the woods and called for her. She came out of the woods slowly, and very hesitantly; he saw why almost immediately. She had two small cubs with her; barely two months old, he guessed. She came up to him and rubbed against him purring loudly. The two cubs scampered up and showed no fear of him. The cougar walked to the back door and the cubs followed. She scratched the door, and then turned to Joe. Joe looked at her and suddenly he understood. She wanted her cubs safe in the coming fight. She naturally looked to Joe to protect them, as he had done for her.

“Well, it looks like you have been a busy girl.” Joe said as he knelt down and gently petted the cubs. “I understand girl, you want your babies safe in the coming fight. Well don’t you worry my sweet; I look to them for you.”

The cougar came up to Joe and licked his hand. Joe went over and opened the door, she went inside and the cubs followed. She made mewling sounds to the cubs and then she licked their heads and turned and went out the door. The cubs remained seated, looking up at Joe with wide eyes.

“Oh boy, this is going to be something new.” He was standing there scratching his head when Millie came into the kitchen.

“Oh my goodness, what have we here?” She bent down and picked up both little furry kittens and cooed to them and held them to her bosom. “I take it we are the baby-sitters while mama is off fighting.”

“Well, ah, she sort of dropped them off...” Joe was out of his league and Millie laughed at his predicament.

“Go, off with ya; these little sweeties and I are going to get along just fine.” Millie rubbed her faced against the kittens and then looked at Joe. “Go I said, don’t worry, I’ll see to them.”

Joe left her cooing to the little cubs and returned to the front line. Stuart asked what was up and Joe told him what had happened. Stuart and the other men laughed.

“What did you expect Joe? You found her as cub and took care of her, and then released her to the forest when she was ready. She thinks of you as family. She knows if she should die, her cubs will be taken care of and returned to the wild when they are grown. It’s only natural that she should bring them to you for protection.”

“Yeah, I guess your right; I hadn’t thought about it like that. They are cute little things; and if I know Millie, she’ll keep them safe from harm.”

Both men laughed and continued inspecting the front lines. They did not notice a lone cougar sprint across the plain heading towards Dragons Hill.

Mariah and Trey passed over many cities; some had been burnt to the ground, some not even touched. They saw no sign of life in or around any of them. They kept flying in a westerly direction. When they passed over Washington, Trey recognized it. The buildings were broken and burned, but he still knew what it was from pictures he had seen as a boy; he was appalled at the damage. They did not stop but continued on their way, across the country. The land was devastated and scorched in many areas. And yet, as they kept going westerly, both commented that it appeared that some of it was trying to come back. They passed over several settlements where the people actually came out and waved to them. Both were stunned at this, but they didn't dare land.

So there are survivors Mariah, Trey called to his friend, not everyone was killed, as we thought.

I think we will find much more Trey, she told her friend earnestly, I think when we find this First; we will find a large settlement of dragons too. I have dreamt it many times.

We shall see my sweet, we shall see.

Trey was beginning to hope again, he was sure now that Mariah's dreams were trying to tell them something. They continued on their way, Mariah increasing her speed. More and more settlements came into view. Land was being cultivated again and he could see crops were growing outside of many of the settlements. But none of the large cities were inhabited; at least they saw no signs of any people in them.

Attuned to his dragon like no other, Trey began to notice a change in her. What is it Mariah? I can feel your excitement.

Trey, I can feel them! There are other dragons up ahead, she told him excitedly, not far, but they are there. Oh my young friend, we are not alone!

Mariah now increased her speed even more. Hold fast Trey, we are close.

Wait Mariah, we don't know these people or dragons... Trey was concerned for her safety. Maybe we should go to the heights and observe first. We shouldn't go barreling in before we know for sure.

Perhaps you are right; I am just so thrilled that there are more of us.

She cut her speed and headed for the heights; both carefully observing the ground below.

Rah and Lady Jennie were flying up in the heights on their way to the location of the first of the crossbow weapons. The Harpies were delighted to show them where it was and to be in their company. They heaped praises on the two dragons and complimented them profusely. Being dragons, they could not refuse such compliments; vanity is their Achilles heel. They found the weapon and the dragons dove on it at supersonic speed; flaming it before those operating it could fire off a shot. They flew back to the heights and the Harpies praised them on their speed and flame. They led them to the second location, but it had been moved. They passed it up saying they would return later; and went to the third location and took it out just as quickly as the first. The men on the ground barely had time to realize what was happening before they were engulfed in flames. And so it went for several hours, each one taken out quickly and efficiently. When all were accounted for they returned to the area where the second one was supposed to be. The Harpies searched all around trying to find it while the dragons stayed in the heights. Artuk, their leader, flew to the heights and gave the dragons an update.

These men are as sly as foxes. They have covered their trail well. It will take some time, but we will find it, he promised. Return to the One, and we will come for you when we locate it.

Thank you Artuk, we have great faith in your abilities, Rah said praising him.

Rah and Lady Jennie returned to Dragons Hill and informed Jake of all that had happened. They remained on the mesa waiting for the call from the Harpies that they had found the last weapon.

While waiting, Lady Jennie inquired of her rider, *My Michael, how are you doing playing shadow?*

I am just fine, my sweet, he told her; it's just a lot of waiting. I don't think he will make his move until the battle begins.

You take care my friend; I worry for your safety. Her voice changed to deep concern; do not let this madman harm you.

Michael picked up on her fear, I shall be careful my sweet. Do not worry yourself so; I am only here to back up Jake.

Ah, I must go, the Harpy has returned. Take great care, my Michael.

The Harpy flew to Rah and landed on his wing, a place of honor to the mighty bird. He raised his head up; his double crest displayed prominently, and keened success.

We have found the hiding place mighty Rah, but it is concealed well. It has the protection of the caves. It will be most difficult to flame it without getting hit by the killing stick.

Show us from on high where it is located my brave and resourceful friend, Rah praised the bird on his efforts; we will decide how to render it useless once we see it.

Follow me mighty one; the Harpy said as it took to the air, it is not too far. Both dragons took to the air following the large Harpy.

High above, Mariah and Trey were passing over Evansville. Trey recognized the fortifications around the town, and knew it meant that this town was under siege. He called quickly to his friend:

Mariah, look below. It seems that that settlement is getting ready for a fight.

And look to the mountain beyond Trey, she pointed out; see the large force coming up its side. Suddenly she exclaimed, ugh, they have the smell of death on them. Even way up here I can feel and see it; they are evil men Trey.

Well, maybe we can offer our help the town below. What do you say, should we help the people in the settlement? He asked her, but she turned her head quickly.

Ho! Look to the forest they are approaching Trey, she slightly tilted to the right, do you see the wolves that are lying in wait for them. This community is in harmony with the wildlife. Let us hold and see what happens, Mariah cautioned, there must be just cause for a dragon to flame a human.

Trey knew better than to second-guess her judgment, *Okay Mariah; we'll just wait for a bit.*

Oblivious to the presence of the other dragon in the air close by, Rah and Lady Jennie followed the Harpy to the heights and hovered as her fellow Harpies flew to location of the wooden crossbow. Sure enough, it was concealed inside a natural cavern. They could wheel it out a short distance and fire the weapon, and then retreat to the safety of the cavern to reload.

Rah, let me fly down and attract their attention. Lady Jennie continued, when they fire, you could swoop down on them and destroy it before they can reload.

Rah snorted, you are not as fast as you think, my mate. And if they see you coming, you could be badly injured.

Rah, we need to put this weapon out of commission. There is only one sure way. I am touched by your concern for my welfare, and it is appreciated; but this must be done...

With that Lady Jennie dove at supersonic speed directly at the hidden cave; Rah's roar of protest echoing in her ears.

Trey and Mariah suddenly became aware of Lady Jennie diving on the forest below. They watched in fascination.

Damn, she's fast, said a very excited Trey.

She is beauty and grace in motion... echoed Mariah breathlessly.

The men on the ground saw Lady Jennie make her dive and waited till the last possible second to fire. The spear went thru the trees and into the air faster than she anticipated. Lady Jennie quickly pulled up and made a perfect one-eighty degree turn in mid-air. Unfortunately, she was not fast enough on the getaway and the spear grazed her side and pierced her right wing, lodging there.

She roared in surprise but quickly recovered calling to her mate...

I am all right Rah; fire the weapon before they reload.

Rah roared loudly, and dove on the weapon in rage. He fired the crossbow before the men could reload it; and those who ran to the back of the cave found no safety there. Small arms fire erupted from the surrounding forest and he directed his attention to them firing the area, knowing there were more evil men hiding there.

While this was going on, Lady Jennie was trying to make it back to Dragons Hill, but instead began spiraling down to the ground rather quickly. She landed with a thud that took her breath away. She knew she was some miles from where she left Rah; and she also 'felt' there were evil men nearby.

High above watching what was taking place, Trey and Mariah dove below and followed the injured dragon. Mariah called below to her and offered her aid and cover.

Ho dragon, may we aid you in any way? I am called Mariah; and this is my rider Trey. Mariah explained further, *we have newly arrived in this area and saw what took place.*

I thank you for the kind offer Lady Mariah; I think I may need some help to return to Dragons Hill. I am Lady Jennie, mate to Rah, First Wing to Jake. We fight the marauders; evil lawless men who kill and take from others. They are a pestilence on this land that must be removed.

Lady Jennie tried to lift and roared at the pain.

Trey, seeing her predicament, asked with respect; *Excuse me Lady Jennie, but you are injured and there are men running to this area. May we assist you?*

Lady Jennie looked up in surprise; *you can speak to me without aid?*

Of course I can – why, am I breaking some protocol? Trey asked earnestly expressing concern in his voice. *I mean no disrespect my lady, but you must get moving.*

It is simply unusual for one to speak without help from his dragon, replied Lady Jennie.

Trey, some evil men are nearby, they have weapons. I believe I am justified in flaming them. Come, we must do this quickly. Lady Jennie watched in surprise as they quickly rose up 200 feet. *Concentrate my young friend and direct to that group of trees to the left.*

Ok Mariah, I see them. Trey centered himself and let go of all other thought. He concentrated on the forest and suddenly everything became clear; he saw the men hiding among the trees, saw their terrible weapons.

Now Mariah, full force!

Mariah let loose a flame so strong and so hot that the entire area was incinerated in an instant. Nothing but a large black circular patch of land remained. Lady Jennie could not believe her eyes. Never had she seen a dragon flame so hot and so intense, except for Jake; and the White.

The beautiful dragon returned and hovered over Lady Jennie, asking if she could get into the air.

Yes, I believe I can, but I cannot stay there, Lady Jennie said with a quiver in her voice. She was feeling the pain now from the spear.

I will slide my wing under your damaged wing and take you to your home base. Mariah informed her, *but first Trey must remove the spear from your wing. Do you give consent?*

By all means, remove the nasty thing. She took a deep breath, *and thank you for your aid and kindness.*

Trey slid off of Mariah and sprinted to the injured dragon. He studied the position of the spear and then went to the front of the dragon and bowed slightly.

My lady, I can give you only five minutes of freedom from pain once I pull it out. You will have to get into the air during that time. Can you do it?

What are you talking about rider? She asked not understanding his meaning.

My rider has healing abilities, Mariah explained, *but he has spent himself firing on the men.*

Trey moved to the side and climbed on to Lady Jennie's wing. He grabbed the end of the large spear and began to twist it, pulling it out of her wing at the same time. Once it was removed he laid his hands on her injury and concentrated. Suddenly Lady Jennie felt no pain. Trey then ran to Mariah and climbed on.

Aah...! Relief at last, get ready... here I go. Lady Jennie leaped into the air.

Mariah glided over to her and slid under Lady Jennie's injured wing and felt the weight of her body. Carefully they rose up and followed Lady Jennie's directions to Dragon's Hill.

Sensing the approach of Rah, Lady Jennie warned her newfound friends, *my mate is coming!*

A large dark brown dragon was streaming towards them at a fast pace. Trey and Mariah were astounded at his size. Never had they seen such a large dragon.

Hold Rah, I am all right, Lady Jennie quickly informed him. These two offered assistance, and even flamed vermin who would have killed me.

I thank you lady dragon for your help to my mate. And in true dragon politeness he continued, Please tell your rider I thank him also.

No need large brown dragon, I heard you clearly, said Trey to a surprised Rah. Feeling his surprise Trey continued, no disrespect, but yes, I can hear and speak to all dragons.

Most unusual for a human; Jake will be very interested in this turn of events. Lady Jennie, my mate, I am glad you were not killed. I will go ahead and inform Jake of this turn of events. Rah took off and headed to Dragons Hill.

Lady Jennie, is there a problem? Trey asked, not wanting to create a bad first impression.

No good rider, it is not a problem; it is just unusual. Ah... Mariah and Trey noticed their burden suddenly became heavier, the pain returns, we have not far to go.

Ten minutes later, to Trey and Mariah's surprise, the sky was filled with dragons and riders; all calling out to Lady Jennie in concern. And then a huge black dragon with silver down its back, and silver markings on its face appeared before them. There was no doubt that this was the dragon leader; the one they called Jake.

Rah flew to Lady Jennie's side and slid his wing under her to aid Mariah. Lady Jennie introduced the two newcomers.

My liege, may I present the Lady Mariah and her rider, Trey; they came to my aid just in time and surely saved me from the marauders.

Jake turned his gaze on the two and Trey heard his strong voice in his mind. *Greetings Lady Mariah and rider Trey; we welcome you to Dragons Hill. We also thank you for saving Lady Jennie; she is most precious to us all.*

Trey was intrigued by his turn of phrase regarding Lady Jennie. *Please join us at Dragons Hill and let us properly thank you.*

With that they turned and headed off, the dragons escorting them the rest of the way to Dragons Hill. As they approached, Trey and Mariah were amazed at the many dragons and riders in the air.

They could see the cultivated fields beyond, and felt many souls in this place. This was surely the place in Mariah's dreams. They circled around and landed on a large plateau. Trey watched as the many riders and dragons landed and formed a wide circle around the injured dragon; he was filled with hope.

Mariah, I think we have finally found a home.

Yes Trey, I believe that he is the one I have been dreaming about, Mariah told him excitedly.

Rah and Jake helped Lady Jennie to the Riders Hall where Jake could minister to her. The riders parted and Daniel came forward. Trey was sure that he was the human leader of this band; he carried himself with great confidence. He went to Mariah first, bowed and introduced himself.

My dear Lady Mariah, we all thank you and your rider for giving aid to Lady Jennie. I am Daniel, the leader here at Dragons Hill, along with Jake, First of the Ancients.

Trey stepped to Mariah's side and placed his hand on her front leg.
Sir, beg pardon, but who is this First of the Ancients?

Daniel turned to Trey; *He is the first of the Dragons of Light to return to earth. He is here to protect and serve mankind, as are we all. Do you have no knowledge of these things?*

Trey shook his head and Mariah answered for them both, *my knowledge is limited Daniel. I was aware that there were things lacking, which is why Trey and I came west.*

Ah, I see, said Daniel. Jake can give you the knowledge that you are missing dear lady. When he is finished healing Lady Jennie, I am sure that you and he will have a long talk. Meanwhile, may I take your rider below and introduce him to everyone?

Just then Michael raced up onto the landing. "Where is she Daniel? Is she all right?" His eyes were wide and there was a hint of fear in them.

"Jake has her in the Riders Hall, Michael," Daniel quickly explained, "He is healing her."

At the mention of his name, Trey looked closer and followed the young man with his eyes as he ran for the Riders Hall. Suddenly the dragons on the Hill began to keen and settled themselves down on the plateau. They would continue the low calming keen throughout the night.

Trey looked to Mariah, *Mariah what is...*

They keen for the injured one Trey, it is a sign of respect and care; I will join them, she added in a soothing voice, you go with the humans; they are good people Trey.

Mariah settled herself down and joined the other dragons, her high-pitched voice blending with theirs and harmonizing eerily. Everyone felt the calming effect immediately.

“Come on Trey, it is best to leave them to this tonight,” Daniel said reaching for his arm; he noticed a slight hesitation in the young man. “It’s all right Trey; they always do this when someone is injured. Come below and we’ll get you something to eat.”

The riders began to leave the plateau and Trey followed them down the mountainside. He missed nothing; the caves in the side of the mountain, the jovial attitude of the riders, and the beauty of the men and women. Daniel led him into the Great Hall and the smell of food caught his attention immediately; it had been a very long time since he smelled food cooking. He looked around the Hall in wonder and was surprised to see so many people laughing and enjoying themselves.

“Your camp is warm and friendly Daniel; the people are filled with light. Mariah and I... well, we didn’t know there were any survivors.”

Daniel looked at the young man and the expression on his face. It was familiar somehow; but he couldn’t quite put his finger on it.

The boy continued, “We thought we were all alone... that is, until the dreams began to come.”

“Well, you have a lot to catch up on then; Master Jeffery will be able to fill you in on the missing pieces. Oh and Trey, we call all the female dragons ‘Lady’ whatever; it’s a sign of respect. And you will discover, now that you are among a large clan of dragons, that polite manners mean a lot to them”

“Oh, I didn’t know; Mariah never mentioned it.” He said softly.

“No harm done Trey, now you know. Your arrival came at an opportune time for Lady Jennie. We thank you for that, she is very special.” Daniel placed his hand on the boys shoulder, “And, you caught us in the middle of war preparations. The marauders have banded together in one large army and are about to attempt to take over.”

“Well that’s plain stupid,” said Trey smirking, “they can’t possibly win; I mean, they’re evil.”

“Do you see all things in black and white, young man?” asked Master Jeffery, joining the group.

“I don’t know what you mean by that sir, but it’s obvious that they won’t succeed.” He looked at Daniel and then at Jeffrey, “I mean, that’s just the way it is.”

Jeffery shook his head up and down, “hmmm... simplicity in thought; excellent.”

Daniel stepped forward, “Trey, I’d like to introduce Master Jeffery. He keeps the Dragon Chronicles; it’s a historical record of all that has taken place since the Great Burning. He can answer all your questions, and bring you up to speed on everything that has happened from the beginning.”

“Young man, when you have refreshed yourself and rested I would like to speak to you about how you and your dragon came together; also, where you have been all this time. I like to keep the records straight and up to date for history’s sake.”

“I will be sure to come by sir; I am very interested in finding out what happened and all that has taken place since then.” Daniel took his arm and led him to the serving line.

“Take as much as you want Trey, we have plenty of food, so don’t be shy,” Daniel told him good-naturedly.

Trey took Daniel at his word and filled his plate to overflowing. Daniel laughed heartedly as Trey try to balance his tray of food as he led him to a table. Steve, Jerry, and Andrew joined them introducing themselves and making Trey feel welcome. After a while Michael came into the Hall, looked around, spotted them and made a beeline for their table.

“Hi,” he said holding out his hand to Trey, “My name is Michael, I just wanted to say thank you for what you did for Lady Jennie. She’s my companion dragon and I don’t know what I would have done if anything...” he left the sentence unfinished as he shook hands with Trey and sat down.

Trey cleared his mouth, “Ma...mmm... excuse me,” he said wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “Lady Mariah and I saw what happened and we couldn’t possibly have left her there. We weren’t sure if we should interfere until we saw the large force of men approaching her with weapons.”

Michael stared at Trey for a moment; the thought of what could have happened filled his mind. The more Michael stared at the young man, the more unsettled he became.

“Have we met before?” he asked quickly.

“No, I don’t think so. I’ve been on the other side of the country for years. Umm... this is so good,” he said shoveling mashed potatoes and meat loaf into his mouth.

Daniel stood up, “well, I hate to cut this short Trey, but we have preparations to set in place for our unwanted company.”

Turning towards Michael he continued; “Michael would you be kind enough to fill Trey in on what is going on and settle him in one of the guest caves for now.”

“Sure Daniel, no problem,” he said smiling as he turned his attention to the young man.

Michael studied his face as he ate. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but he felt like he knew him from somewhere; and for some reason this seemed to upset him. The boy’s thick dark auburn hair was tied in a semi braid at his neck; a spattering of freckles across his nose gave him a friendly and wholesome appearance. His deep brown eyes were very familiar and unnerving; Michael couldn’t figure out why.

Maybe Kate will know when she returns, he thought to himself.

Up above Jake left the Riders Hall and made his way to Lady Mariah. Eyes closed, and deep in concentration keening for the injured dragon, she did not feel him approach.

My dear Lady Mariah, he called to her soothingly, please awake from your trance and join me.

Mariah's eyes opened wide and she looked at Jake. Sir, you are the one I have been dreaming about so often. The one who would fill in the gaps of my knowledge – tell me who I am.

Yes dear lady. Jake walked with her along the plateau and then turned and said; you and I must take to flight, for this must be done in the air, and quickly. We are at war and the knowledge will aid you in the coming battle.

Both dragons took to the heights and soon a bright light could be seen over the plateau.

Down below Trey had just finished eating and was taking a drink when he suddenly he dropped the cup, arched his back and let out a loud yell. Heads turned quickly as he fell off his seat onto the ground. Suddenly he jumped up and shouted “Mariah!” Eyes wide in terror, he turned and ran out of the Hall. As if in a trance he raced up the mountain, a blue-white light forming around him.

Having been called by Michael telepathically, Daniel came running and stopped short as he saw Trey heading up the mountain. He saw the light about him and knew the same was happening above to his dragon. Quickly he called to Jake.

Jake, these two are connected as one. The boy is feeling the same thing as his dragon. He is encircled in a bright blue-white light. He's headed up the mountain Jake; I think he's headed for you.

Jake and Mariah began to descend to the large plateau. The dragons all fanned out to form a circle around them. Trey came up onto the landing area and the dragons parted to allow him to enter the circle and join his dragon, their lights blending together as one.

Mariah... what is this... what's happening?

Trey began to feel the flow of information; sights and sounds speeding by his conscious mind. A flash of someone he knew from his past; all that had happened since the Great Burning. Understanding the significance of the emergence of Jake and what it meant to this world. The rise of the Ancients, and the battles fought and won. His and Lady Mariah's role in all this became very clear; his ability to heal; the closeness of Mariah; and all his questions were answered. He finally understood it all. The light slowly faded and he was placed on the ground by his dragon's side.

Mariah! He called out in excitement as he threw his arms around her lowered head. Tears streamed down his face, *we finally know the truth!*

Mariah brought her wing forward and wrapped it around the excited young man; *Yes Trey, we know who we are and what we were sent to do. I am pleased for us both.*

Jake came forward and both stood to face him. Trey bowed slightly to Jake as he felt it was the proper thing to do; Lady Mariah did the same.

We welcome you to the family of the Dragons of Light, Jake said as he threw his head back, let loose a large flame and roared a loud 'Approval'.

The other dragons joined in welcoming them by roaring also. Trey could hear all their shouts of 'welcome' and good wishes. He and Lady Mariah were overcome with emotion. Daniel came to Jake's side as the riders gathered around Trey and welcomed him. *Jake, what is going on with him?*

He and his dragon are healers Daniel, the same as I. It is a bit unusual, but not unheard of. Jake watched the young man, and when he smiled at the rider's congratulating him, Jake saw something familiar. Of course! He suddenly shouted. I will have a word with the young man and find out how they met. I believe that is the key. Turning he called to Rah, Rah, will you escort Lady Mariah to the feeding grounds and see that she eats her full.

Right away sire, he answered and moved towards her.

Trey, Jake called to him; will you join Daniel and me for a moment?

Trey disengaged himself from the throng of well-wishers and joined Jake. As they walked along heading towards the Riders Hall, Trey got the feeling that they were curious about him and Mariah. As they entered the Riders Hall Trey looked upward at the size of the cavern. He saw ledges above encircling the huge cavern.

Places for the dragons to sit when they have a meeting, he thought to himself.

Yes, you are correct Trey, Jake replied. This is where dragon and rider meet when there is a need. Now I would like to ask you a few questions, if you don't mind?

Trey looked at Daniel, and then at Jake. *I've been expecting them Jake, he said with a wry smile, shoot.*

How did you and Lady Mariah discover each other? I want details, they are very important, Jake told him, to blend with a dragon outside the egg is most unusual.

Trey went over to the large stone table at the center of the room and leaned against it, hanging his head for a moment. He took a deep breath and raised his head and looked at them. Daniel was immediately stunned by the look on his face. He had seen that exact same look before, it was when he had confronted Kate and she had finally told him her fears.

Jake...? Daniel began.

Let him start Daniel, I know - I have seen it also, Jake quickly said.

The story came flowing out. He had seen his family murdered by the initial attack. He had been scooped up by one of the devils along with another man. They had flown for hours across the country. At one point the beast had raised his claw and eaten the screaming man. Then the dragon had met up with another group of his kind and they had fought over who was going to eat Trey. In the ensuing fight, he had been dropped. He fell through many trees cutting his leg open from the thigh to the ankle. When he finally hit the ground his adrenalin was flowing so strong that he didn't notice his leg. He had quickly searched for a place to hide and found a cave nearby and scooted inside before the dragons spotted him.

He must have passed out because when he awoke and it was dark outside. He was in terrible pain, his leg throbbing. He dragged himself to the rear of the cave and found an opening into another chamber. It sloped downward and he dragged and rolled himself down into a huge cavern littered with dragon eggs. Dead and dying dragons of all sizes were spread out all over the place. He was horrified at first, and then felt pity for the suffering dragons. As with all the others, he heard a voice calling out in pain. It was a tiny little dragon that had been ripped from her egg. She was bleeding from a wound on her leg and in terrible pain. Her piteous cries touched his heart; he was so tired of all the death and destruction. He scooped her up in his arms not caring what she was; she was hurt and needed comfort – this was all that mattered. He dragged himself back to the other cave and in the process they made contact. Propped up against a wall in the outer chamber, holding the little dragon to his chest, both were exhausted and soon fell asleep. As she lay there her outstretched leg made contact with his open wound. Her blood mingled with his; and his with hers; they became as one.

This explains a lot young man, Jake told him solemnly. You have dragon blood in your veins, and Lady Mariah has human blood flowing thru hers. It explains the unusual link you have with each other, and also your healing ability.

Daniel added; *you are more like brother and sister than dragon and rider.*

Taken off guard Trey said defiantly, *there is nothing wrong with that; she is my friend, my closest confidante...*

Jake immediately tried to put the boy at ease and gently said, *Easy young one, we are not passing judgment on you. We are merely trying to find the reason for your unusual abilities, and your dragon's.* Jake's soothing voice calmed Trey.

Well, we weren't around other dragons and riders; we didn't even know you guys existed. We were both scared to death and neither of us knew what to do. God, she was only a baby! The boys face was filled with the agony of what he must have gone thru emotionally. *Mariah was torn from her egg... she had to mature outside of the egg, do either of you know how hard that is?* Trey looked at Daniel, and then at Jake. *She was so traumatized she almost died – it took everything I had to keep her alive.* He hung his head and wiped his eyes. *It took her damn near two years time to become fully grown. She lost a lot being ripped from her egg like that; she doesn't think she was able to mature properly.* Trey turned to Jake, *but we got by, we managed, and we became very close.*

Yes Trey, what you two accomplished is a wonder. Your love for Lady Mariah is what kept her alive during that time. Jake shifted his weight and faced Trey. A quick question Trey, where was your home originally, what city?

When he answered, Daniel's eyes were wide, in surprise, "sun-of-a-gun!"

Jake chuckled loudly; *your wonders never cease to amaze me, Father!*

Trey was looking at them both, *what?*

Jake silently called Michael to the Riders Hall and had him wait before entering; instructing him to listen for a moment.

Exactly what happened in the beginning, Trey? Jake asked him. Bear with me, it is very important.

Trey looked at Daniel, and then at Jake. He took a deep breath and began.

Well, we had been hearing about them on the TV, but they hadn't made it to our area yet. Mom and Dad were preparing our things and loading the car. We were going to try and make it to the mountains. I was in my room when I heard Mom scream and I ran out to the garage. They were everywhere... our neighborhood was on fire.

Trey took a long breath and continued. It was dusk outside, and there were fires everywhere, and you could hear them flying overhead. That sound... the roaring... we could hear the neighbor's screaming. My mother and father tried to get my brother and me to safety, but the dragons dove on them; it was very fast; his voice faltered, they were gone in an instant, he whispered, I don't think they suffered.

Trey's voice began to quiver and he tried to clear his throat, I saw others diving on my brother and me... and... and...

Michael stepped into the cave and picked up the conversation.

...and you pushed me at a pile of debris which fell and covered me...

(Trey spun around and stared at Michael in disbelief, eyes wide - mouth open...)

Michael continued with tears in his eyes.

...hiding me from their view. You ran the other way to attract them away from me, but I saw. I saw the giant claw come down and pick you up. I heard you scream Trey; I saw you being taken off... Michael hung his head for a moment, it has haunted me for years, he said softly. Me-Ma found me a little while after that and took me away.

Trey looked at Michael, studying his face again, looking for what he remembered.

"I'm told I have Dad's nose, I can see Mom all over you," said Michael smiling slightly, tears in his eyes. "That's what was upsetting me when I looked at you; I was seeing Mom."

"Michael...?" Trey questioned as he came closer.

Trey held Michael at arms length, staring at him, “Michael, you’re alive!”

Both young men were staring at the other, and then patting each other on the back and hugging each other, crying, and uttering incoherently.

“Oh God... this is unbelievable!” Michael exclaimed as they both embraced again.

“My God - you really are Michael! There’s the star shaped scar from when I hit you in the head with the Bar-B-Q thongs.”

“And there’s the mark on your neck when I whacked you with the stupid sword and took out a chunk of your skin. Remember how you bled all over the place, and scared Mom half to death.” And then they sat there on the ground, staring at each other and grinning.

“You said Me-Ma found you; Lord, I don’t doubt it. She was one tough cookie; I pity the dragon that messed with her,” Trey laughed.

My sentiments exactly, Jake interjected sarcastically.

Trey looked at Jake puzzled and then continued, “Is she still alive, Michael?”

Jake chuckled loudly and Daniel choked up laughing, “is she ever...!”

“Alive and kicking Trey... um, yeah, uh...” He looked about at Jake and Daniel, “you really need to read the Dragon Chronicles, Trey. It tells all about how we got here. It will explain everything and answer all your questions.”

“Okay Michael, but first I want to see her, tell me, where is she?” Trey smiled at his brother.

“She’s not here right now, but she’ll be back in a couple of days. She’ll be so happy to see you.” Michael grinned at his brother.

Michael,” Daniel stepped forward, “why don’t you take Trey to your cave and get him a copy of the Dragon Chronicles so he can catch up quickly.”

“Right Daniel,” reaching out his hand to his brother he said, “come on Trey, we have a lot to catch up on.”

Turning to Jake Michael added; *Oh Jake, our unwanted guest has settled down in the Great Hall. He’s keeping to himself.*

He will wait till the battle is over before making his move, Jake told him, we are well aware of his movements, Michael. When he makes his way to the mountain we will be ready for him.

The newly found brothers left the Riders Hall arm in arm, chatting about finding each other at last.

“... and you have to meet my Sally. She’s going to be so pleased, and my son Taylor... and Oreo and Tabs... You really need to read the Chronicles!”

Back in the cave Daniel was trying to put all this into perspective. He shook his head smiling, *Jake; this is going to be some kind of shock for Kate. After we’re done with taking out the trash, maybe I should go to Dragons Bay and prepare her.*

That would be a good idea Daniel, I am sure Lady Kate will be overjoyed. Jake now rose up, now we must get ready for tomorrows battle. They are up over the mountain and will try to sneak down towards Evansville in the early morning before daylight.

Yeah, laughed Daniel, well they are going to have a welcoming committee like no other.

Down along the shore of Peru, in Dragons Bay, Kate was making her way to the top of the plateau. She went directly to Valotin and bowed before him, indicating she wished to have a private conversation.

Lady Kate, he said acknowledging her, what brings you up here? I sense you are upset.

Oh Valotin, I don't know, she said hesitantly, I, I feel that something is amiss. I can't put my finger on it; but something is out of balance. Is Daniel all right? Is Jake safe and well?

My Lady, Daniel and Michael are fine, as is Jake. You worry needlessly; he said reassuringly, this is the first time you have been separated, is that correct? Kate nodded and Valotin continued, then that is all it is, My Lady, just separation anxiety.

Do you really think so? Is it possible? Oh, she sighed deeply, I guess you're right Valotin; I'm just being foolish. I have spent too much time fearing the worst.

Kate turned and looked out onto the Bay.

Billy and the other children just love it here. Your dragons and riders have been so sweet and comforting. Kate hugged the large dragon, Thank you for your reassurance Valotin. She turned and went back down the plateau towards the town.

Valotin chuckled to himself as his queen came to his side.

You did not tell her the good news my mate, she said sweetly.

Valotin looked to his mate, my sweet lady that is for Daniel to do when he joins us in a few days.

Ah, I see, she said chuckling and rubbing against her mate.

Speaking of good news, Valotin said as he rubbed his neck against hers, Lady Emily came to see me this morning. Lady Valeria raised her head and looked at her mate. She will have some surprising news for Adam when he returns.

I did not think it was possible for them, she said.

Valotin chuckled at her, my dear lady; all things are possible in this new world of ours.

Back in Evansville, Joe and Stuart were on the front line waiting for the sun to rise. They had begun to hear howls and yells of surprise coming from the mountain. They knew that the marauders had passed over the top of the mountain and were attempting to make their way down towards the town. They could only imagine the surprise on their faces when they ran into the packs of snarling wolves. Suddenly the silence of early morning was broken by the flash and sound of gunfire, and then more screams.

“Well, this is one time I’m glad to hear screaming,” said Stuart under his breath.

“Yeah,” answered Joe, “I wouldn’t want to be them right now.” Joe looked up and down the line of men and women. “Ok folks, this is what you all have trained for. They’ll be coming over the rise soon. Make your fire count; take your time, pick your targets carefully before you fire.”

Turning to the large green dragon in the field, he called out, *Daowyn; you can tell the sharp shooters to take to the air now.*

Come and ride me into battle Joe, Stuart can handle things here. He lowered his wing so Joe could climb on easily.

“Stu, the line is all yours; Daowyn wants me to ride him into battle.”

“You go for it Joe, never get another chance like this. I can handle this easily,” Stuart said grinning at him. “Good luck man,” he shouted as Joe ran for the mighty dragon. Stuart turned and looked towards Amy’s squadron of women lined up at the fence and sought out a face.

Joe and Daowyn took to the air and Joe got a better view of his defenses. From above he could see the entire town; it was laid out in a large arc that was used as a buffer zone between them and the mountain. They were ready with their traps, and firepower to repel the invaders.

Amy had come to Joe with a plan her women had come up with and he had given her the okay. The women proficient in the crossbow offered a plan to create a break-wall at the center of their outer wall defenses. Amy had the men build a platform just behind the double wooden fence. Her troops were lined up in three squads of about ten women each. They would fire in a series of barrages and keep the marauders from bunching up and attempting a push towards the middle.

Nothing created sheer terror as much as arrows silently flying thru the dark; watching the men around you fall and wondering when you are next. The uncertainty of not knowing where they would come from would create exactly the effect Amy was hoping for. She would keep up the barrage till they were out of arrows, and then her team would resort to their rifles.

Lady Elsbeth was flying high over the battlefield with Daphne on one wing and Jason on the other; both had made excellent contact with her in the test runs. Their sniper abilities were heightened when in her care; she found she could direct their fire to the targets below easily. The first wave came out of the forest howling and yelling like madmen. They set up several machine gun nests and began to fire as their men made it further down to the edge of the forest and began firing. They were setting up a buffer zone while waiting for the rest of the men and the missile launchers to make their way to their positions. Both sides kept up a barrage of fire and after twenty-five minutes there were more dead and injured on the mountain than in the town.

Well, this won't do at all, said Lady Elsbeth looking below. Jason, Daphne, I want you both to concentrate; look thru my eyes to the scene below. The creatures manning the weapons that shoot so fast; take them out.

Both men manning the submachine gun positions suddenly fell forward and lay sprawled across their weapons. When turned over they both had neat little holes in the top of their heads. The men below raised their heads and looked above, and then ran for cover in a panic.

Lady Elzbeth chuckled, *now we must see to the ridge above. I believe those below were waiting for more weapons to arrive.*

My Lady, Daphne asked, why don't we just fire the whole forest?

Oh no, we can't do that Daphne, she replied quickly. It would scorch the whole mountain; when the winter snow and spring rains come there would be nothing to hold the water back. There would be enormous mudslides, and the town could be flooded as well.

I see, I hadn't thought about that, replied Daphne, I can see I still have a lot to learn.

That is as it should be my dear, she explained further, we are constantly learning and growing.

Uh, Lady Elzbeth; called Jason excitedly, I think they are carrying rocket launchers; look below, see? There are five or six of them; that is not a good thing.

Very well Jason, then we will do something about it. Lady Elzbeth banked and flew over the mountain and out onto the plain; she then turned and came in on the backside.

Be careful my lady, yelled Jason, those things are deadly; they could take you out, or do some serious damage at the least.

Thank you Jason, I shall be careful; both of you check your restraints, she told them. If I have to move quickly I do not want you falling off me. Now, let's take out as many of them as we can before they do any damage.

Three of the men fell to the ground in quick succession. Those around them began to run for cover.

Damn, I missed that one, said a dejected Jason.

Suddenly two more men fell in quick succession; *I got two more Jason,* Daphne called to him reassuringly. *Oh look out... they're firing one of the rockets at us!*

Lady Elzbeth banked right and rose up at super sonic speed. The rocket fell and exploded harmlessly in an empty field. Two more rockets came at them; Lady Elzbeth waited till they were close and then she fired on both rockets. They exploded and fell to earth harmlessly.

These are nasty men! She said in a huff as Jason and Daphne laughed at her indignation.

Daowyn came around the mountain and before Lady Elzbeth could warn him a missile was shot off. She yelled a quick warning and he banked and turned as the missile slammed into his hard leathery outer body and exploded, stunning Daowyn. He began to spiral down wildly to the field at the edge of the defenses. He landed with such a thud that Joe thought he was badly injured. Three more missiles were launched and Lady Elzbeth had to make a run for it. Joe immediately jumped off of Daowyn and set up a position in front of the injured dragon. He knew that the bastards would come a running and try to kill the large dragon, now that it was on the ground.

Stuart had watched the whole thing and feared that the dragon was mortally wounded. He ordered his people to increase their fire as a cover. He took ten men and slowly began to make their way towards the downed dragon. About 25 disorganized men began running towards their direction, firing wildly. Suddenly, out of nowhere the Harpies descended on them. Screaming their hideous yell, they dove on the men and made short work of them. Most retreated howling with terrible wounds to their faces.

Stuart and his men fanned out along the length of the fallen dragon. Joe stood his ground; he would not let them hurt Daowyn. The only thing he feared was that one of the rocket launchers would be brought up and fired on them.

And then he felt and heard in his mind: *ooh... ach... well this just won't do. Those silly men have given me a headache; that is not a good thing to do to a dragon; we tend to get testy.*

Daowyn! You're all right! Joe ran to his large head as he raised it slowly; *I thought they had hurt you badly.*

It takes a lot more than that to do-in a dragon. Daowyn reassured Joe, *no dear boy, they just knocked the wind out of me.* Daowyn stretched his wings, *ouch! Oh my, it seems my right wing is sprained, I must have landed on it when I fell.*

Lady Elzbeth called to her mate, *Daowyn, are you injured my mate? Can I be of help?*

My Lady, I am unhurt in body, only my pride has been damaged. Ach, I seem to have sprained my right wing when I landed; I cannot fly. He knew this news would be passed to Dragons Hill quickly and reinforcements would arrive.

Do not worry my lady, Joe called to her; we will protect Daowyn with our lives.

Lady Elzbeth chuckled, I thank you for your kind offer Joe, but Daowyn can take care of himself. Suddenly her tone changed, Daowyn, the top ridge- two men with launchers. They are waiting by the two large boulders for the men with the rockets to catch up to them.

Daowyn rose up and stretched his long neck. Joe, have Stuart and his men hit the ground!

“Stuart, you and your men dive for cover,” Joe called out doing the same.

Daowyn studied the top ridge, and then lowered his head. Not you Joe, I need your help to flame. Come climb to my head and please concentrate on the top ridge, to the left. Do just as I have taught you.

Joe climbed onto the dragon, perched behind his left ear, and concentrated. Suddenly a long thin flame burst forth from the mighty dragon and shot to the ridge top in seconds. It engulfed the two men with the rocket launchers; their screams short lived. And then several explosions could be heard as the rockets exploded from the searing heat.

Joe called the all clear to Stuart and his men. Daowyn then politely inquired if he could enter the town. With his wing injured, he explained, he would need a place out of the line of fire. Stuart quickly made his way back to the defense perimeter and went straight to Amy. Soon there were fifteen women running to the dragon with smiles on their faces and crossbows in their hands. They formed a line and provided a buffer zone with their fire to allow the dragon to make it safely inside the perimeter of the town’s defenses.

Taking this opportunity, several of the marauders were sent forward to try and blow up the fence. None made it even close; the bear-traps and the pits made quick work of any who tried.

Once inside Daowyn offered himself as a firing point. He had Amy’s women line themselves up on his large hindquarter and then curled his tail around in front of them providing protection. Their height gave them a vantage point as they began to fire on the second wave of marauders coming down off the mountain; striking their targets with deadly accuracy.

This second group was made up of the hardened, seasoned fighters. These men had fought with Dixon for several years; they were ferocious and gave no quarter, not even to their own men. Any wounded they found on the field were dispatched if they could not rise and retreat to the mountain. They held a large piece of metal fashioned into a long shield before them; small holes cut into them so they could see and fire. They maintained a steady stream of fire and slowly began to make their way forward.

The women held their ground firing in a succession of waves and hitting their targets. Melinda had joined this group of women and was thrilled at being able to pay these evil men back for their cruelty. She also knew that she would in all probability run into Stuart, not at all an unpleasant thing. She asked permission, and received it, to climb up to Daowyn’s head and fire from there. Each of her arrows found their mark, and she soon began to realize that Daowyn was directing her arrows.

Joe, Daowyn called, I believe they are seeing the futility of this assault. Ah... they also realize that Dixon has abandoned them. They cannot win and the truth is now dawning on them. They will be even more dangerous now.

Bazookas had been brought up and were now firing in quick succession. Joe yelled for everyone to take cover. Most of the shells fell short of the fence, but a few managed to do enough damage to allow a breach in the wall. Stuart took ten men and made for the breach, firing as they went. Amy's saw what was taking place and she and the two women by her side headed for the breach at a dead run. The hoard surged forward firing and before anyone could stop them they began to push through the opening. It soon came down to hand to hand combat between the two groups. Stuart and his men fought valiantly, but the assailing force was almost too much.

It was then that Amy and her two companions arrived at the scene; they drew their swords and jumped into the fray. Soon hands and arms were flying in all directions. Blood was flowing freely on the battlefield. The women fought like demons possessed, advancing continuously and giving no quarter. Slowly they began to push the hoard back as the marauders began running from their sharp swords.

It seems that they have not had enough, said Joe as a third wave came down the mountain. This Dixon is a master strategist; he keeps us fighting with no respite.

He hopes to wear down your men, Joe, Daowyn replied, while we are busy here fighting these brigands, he will put his true plan into action.

What? Joe looked at Daowyn, what do you mean? This is just a diversion?

Yes Joe, he means to attack Jake himself. Surprise showed on Joe's face as Daowyn continued, that is why Lady Kate was sent away.

I didn't know, replied Joe quickly.

Ho, look to the fence Joe, Daowyn was obviously excited. Ah, what a sight!

My God... Joe was stunned as he watched below perched on Daowyn's head.

Amy is a true warrior, Daowyn whispered. She fights like the Amazon of long ago. Now there were fighters Joe; they never gave any quarter when in battle.

Amy and her two companions were advancing thru the force like nothing he had ever seen. His eyes could barely keep up with their strikes as they parried and spun and sliced thru the horde. The men around them were not able to get a single strike, or a single shot off, before they were upon them. The force began to retreat as arms and hands and legs were sliced off by their deadly blades. Suddenly a bugle could be heard sounding retreat. The large force broke off and ran for the mountain. Amy and her two fellow warriors were standing in the center of a bloody mountain of bodies. All three were covered in blood and dirt and, Joe thought to himself, they never looked so noble.

Back at Dragons Hill, Michael returned to his cave and found a very excited Trey sitting by the fire. As he entered he saw Book I of the Dragon Chronicles closed on the nearby table. As he came in Trey rose quickly.

“Michael!” Trey called to him, “This is all so fantastic, I mean, Me-Ma is Kate? You and she started all this and built up an army of dragons. It’s just so unbelievable.

Michael laughed at his brother’s excitement, “Yes Trey, it’s all true. But to be honest, it was Kate and Jake and Daniel who did most of it. They could envision the future Jake was striving for. It’s more than just you and me; it’s about all of us.”

“Boy, Mariah and I have really been out of the loop all these years.” Trey suddenly cocked his head as if he were listening to something.

“Trey... ?” Michael began.

“Shh... ” Trey held up his hand... “The dragons are all calling, they are very agitated. They say that one of them is injured, on the ground in... in Evansville.” He looked to his brother.

My Michael, Daowyn is injured... Lady Jennie informed Michael.

I know my sweet, Trey heard you all calling to each other with the news. Michael looked at his brother with new respect.

Your brother is gifted my Michael, she replied.

“You really can hear all the dragons!” Michael said with surprise.

“I don’t know why everyone is so surprised at that,” Trey said annoyingly, “isn’t that what happens when you merge with your dragon?”

“No Trey, not everyone has that ability.” Michael further explained, “There are only a small handful of riders with that gift.”

“Really,” Trey looked at his brother, “I guess that explains it; you see I didn’t know you have small dragons either.” Michael looked at his brother perplexed.

“What are you talking about,” he asked.

“The small dragon hiding from view, she’s somewhere here on Dragons Hill. She watches someone, and sometimes growls. I can’t get a location, but I can feel her, she is really determined. It’s almost like she’s stalking someone.”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about, Trey.” Michael replied.

“I don’t feel anything bad from her; just a solid determination to protect.” Trey scratched his head and continued, “I’ve never felt anything quite like this, it’s very strange.”

“Maybe we should tell Jake,” offered Michael.

No need to bother Michael, Jake suddenly interjected, I am aware of our small guardian. Trey, would you like to join us in battle?

Oh yes Jake, Mariah and I would love to join in, Trey replied quickly.

Good, come to the mesa top and join Andrew, Jake ordered, he will direct you. Good hunting.

“Aren’t you going to join us Michael?” Trey asked.

“I have something to do here Trey, I’ll see you later,” Michael yelled as he waved and left the cave.

Trey went to the mesa and found Mariah waiting for him. He thought to himself that she looked especially fit and beautiful; a day of eating to her full, no doubt.

We go to battle Trey, I am very excited, she told him, and we can display our abilities to their fullest.

Let us not get carried away Mariah; we don’t want to scare everyone. Trey still worried about their pinpointing a target and not injuring any nearby innocent.

You always worry needlessly my brother; Mariah admonished him, what good is having a gift if you never use it?

Andrew and Jerry were mounted and waiting for Trey.

Andrew shouted out, “Come on Trey,” he waved as his dragon, Lady Ariel, turned around, “join us in ridding the world of this vermin.”

Lady Ariel was airborne in seconds with Trey and Mariah right behind her.

We’re going to let the town defend it self; it is their right. We are here for back up just in case. Hopefully scare them enough that they make a run for it back to where they came from; Andrew explained.

Ah, said Lady Mariah, then you will hunt them down and remove them. Excellent plan Andrew!

Hey, she spoke to me... I mean without going thru my dragon. Andrew was stunned.

I told you we can speak to dragons and riders alike, is it a problem? Both heard Steve laughing in the background as Lady Elsbeth flew to them and greeted Lady Mariah and Trey.

Greetings new warriors, you are most welcome. She curled her head and spoke to Steve. Steven my rider, why don’t you fill them in on what has occurred so far.

Steve filled them in and also explained the two shooters on each of Lady Elsbeth's wings. Trey and Mariah found that very interesting. He also explained why they didn't fire the whole area. Trey saw the reasoning in that. Then Steve informed them all that they had a different mission and all headed northeast at a fast pace.

At Dragons Hill, outside the Great Hall, Dixon watched the large group of dragons take to the air and head towards Evansville. He carefully melted into the crowd and quietly slipped away unobserved. Now was the time to put his plan into motion. He had spent the last two days listening to everything that was said. Watching the routines of the Dragons Hill people, making careful note of who was in charge; observing the closeness between Sam and the Riders. And most important of all, Sam's jaunts up the hill with a tray of food every morning and evening. He had bided his time carefully and now was the time to act; he would do what they least expected

He immediately returned to his quarters and grabbed his canvas bag with his gear. He carefully looked about and when sure no one was watching went down to the large waterfall to begin the transformation. He shaved off his disheveled beard, washed and cut his hair. He even plucked and shaved his bushy eyebrows. Then he stepped into the water and began washing himself, scrubbing off layers of dirt. He cut and cleaned his fingernails, and even his toenails. He brushed his teeth and flossed. When finished he dried himself, and then his hair; combing it neatly and pulling it back in the same manner as the other men, tying it at the base of his neck. He dressed in clothing like the other townsmen, simple jeans and T-shirt.

When he stepped from the waterfall area, he was transformed. What appeared was a clean-cut, nice looking man in his early thirties. He bent himself when he walked and held himself with rounded hunched shoulders belying his true size. He put a smile on his face and joined the others in the Great Hall. Joining a table of men he was engaging and helpful as they sat about discussing what was happening. When Sam appeared and began to clear off the tables, he got up and offered his help.

No one guessed it was the same man that had sat in the corner by himself for the past two days.

Dee and Lee Chin reported to Jake that they had lost the man. He seemed to have vanished from view. All they could 'feel' was a slight hint of suppressed rage.

This turn of events left Jake very unsettled.

Unknown to Dixon, a pair of determined yellow eyes had watched his every move.

Back in Evansville the tide was turning; several hours of fighting had gained the marauders nothing. They were beginning to realize that they weren't going to breach the defenses of the town. And since Dixon hadn't showed up and directed their movements, they began to lose heart for the battle. They began to believe that the dragons had indeed killed Dixon. The remaining leaders decided to make a break for it and return to their home base. Knowing that they would eventually see the light, so to speak, Jake had sent a band of dragons and riders to Walkersville to free the people there and prepare a welcome for the returning killers.

Hovering in the heights over Walkersville, the dragons studied the town carefully. They pinpointed the locations of all the sentries that Dixon had left behind, as well as where their headquarters was located.

Steven put forth a plan, *I suggest we take out the sentries with our snipers, and then set the captives free. The dragons can fire on the headquarters if they catch on to what we are doing.*

Hold Steve, injected Trey quickly, his voice filled with emotion. They have all the captives in the high school gym. The doors and windows are rigged with grenades. Steve looked at Trey with disbelief; this guy must have expected some kind of a rescue attempt; anyone trying to get out or in will set them off.

Steve looked at this strange young man, *Lady Elsbeth, what is it with this guy? How can he know all that?*

He sees, my Steven, she replied with confidence, he knows!

Trey, we can cut a hole in the roof and extract them that way, Lady Mariah offered.

Mariah my sweet, I don't know if we can pinpoint an area like that. Trey looked at Steve and Andrew and shrugged his shoulders, I would do better making a hole in the backside of the building.

Ok, Andrew offered, lets wait for dark and take out the sentries first, and then see what happens.

They waited above for two and a half hours talking among themselves. Steve asking where Trey and Lady Mariah, (she chuckled at his calling her that), had been hiding all this time. Trey explained that they both thought everyone was dead. They had fought several of the black dragons when they encountered them, but had not seen any for several years.

Darkness finally covered the land and Lady Elsbeth quietly began a spiral descent over the town. *Daphne, Jason, please use your crossbows; we want silence.*

The three sentries on the rooftops were quietly taken out without anyone noticing. Then Lady Ariel and Lady Mariah spiraled down and joined Lady Elsbeth and began to take out the rest of the brigands.

Lady Mariah, Steve called to her, I want you and Trey to rescue the people held in the gym.

Yes sire, she answered quickly banking to the right and heading over to the high school buildings.

Trey, Mariah called agitation in her voice; do you feel the men hiding on the roof here?

Yes Mariah, they could set off the whole thing. He knew what had to be done, yet hesitated.

You have to do it Trey; there is no other way. Mariah urged him further; they would surely kill all these innocent people if given the chance.

I know, I know what I have to do; but... Trey hung his head murmuring under his breath, murder is still murder. He sighed deeply, Get right over the gym; try to keep high enough so they don't see you.

Mariah hovered over the gym and waited for Trey. He hated when he had to do this; he hated taking a life. No matter how he tried to reason the need for their deaths, to him it was still murder. These were killers, he knew, but killing them like this somehow made him feel that he was just as bad as them.

No Trey, Trey suddenly heard Jake's strong voice in his mind. These men have chosen of their own free will to kill and maim. Jake's voice was calm and deliberate as he spoke with great confidence. They were allowed to live thru the Great Burning, and they have squandered that gift by killing and taking what is not theirs. They need to be removed for they are a cancer on our world. Now do what must be done and take no blame.

Trey took a deep breath and calmed himself. He believed what Jake said was true; and Jake would know. He now concentrated on his targets below. He brought the two men into focus and began.

The two men suddenly turned and faced each other, studying each other carefully.

Trey's eyes rolled up in his head as he concentrated. He sent out flashes of greed, anger and distrust.

Down below the two men began to shout at each other and back away angrily.

Concentrating now, Trey saw each man reach for his weapon.

The two men on the roof drew their knives and circled each other. In the heat of the insanity that followed, both fell to the roof mortally wounded.

Trey leaned over Mariah and retched. After a few minutes he sat up and told her he was all right. Mariah flew to the rear of the gym and Trey began to study the back wall. He noted the shape of the bricks, and the spacing between each column.

Ok Mariah, tight beam about four feet from the left corner, up around six feet and arc around just four feet wide and then down again. Trey took a deep breath, Tell me when you are ready my friend.

Mariah took a long deep breath and she began to concentrate. Slowly the fog began to lift and then it became very clear as she was seeing thru Trey's eyes.

Yes... yes I see it now; I'm ready when you are Trey.

Concentrating, Trey saw a long thin beam of light begin cutting thru the bricks and inner wall of the gym. *Now Mariah!*

A thin beam of light shot forth from Mariah and began cutting thru the wall. It sliced thru the brick and wooden beams and drywall, taking only seconds. Feeling the build up of the flame, Mariah threw her head backwards and shot a huge blue-white flame silently into the air. *Whew, that was very hard to maintain. I am glad you were directing me Trey.*

You did great Mariah; he answered praising her precision and control.

The inner wall of the gym collapsed and they could see thru the opening. A crowd of people, mostly women and children, were staring out at them in sheer terror. Trey felt their fear and immediately sent a wave of relief thru the gym. Suddenly they all seemed to wake from a stupor and began looking about. They surged forward climbing over the debris and out onto the football field. They all stared as Lady Elsbeth landed and Steve dismounted and walked over to them.

"Hello there, we've come to free you from those monsters." Steve smiled his best and continued, "You don't have to be afraid anymore, we've removed the marauders from this town. They won't be bothering you again; and their cohorts are fairing no better.

The crowd stood there staring at the dragons and then at Steve.

Steve realized what he had to say and sighed, "Jake sent us here to free you."

They erupted in cheers and shouts and surged forward:

"Thank you so much..."

"Jake sent you... we heard all about him..."

"The Town Crier was here before they came..."

"Have you freed our men too?"

"Your men...?" Steve looked at Andrew.

"Where are they being held?" asked Andrew looking about the group. "We didn't know about them."

A woman of about twenty-five stepped forward, "My name is Shelly. We think they took them to the mines; they used them as slave labor to build something. We haven't seen them in months, but we're sure they are still alive."

Steve turned to Trey, "Try and see if you can pick up on anything."

"I'd have to go near the area Steve," he answered quickly.

Sorry," Steve apologized, "but I don't know the range of your abilities yet."

"Wait, there's another thing more important," Shelly offered, "Charlie managed to get out thru the air vents; she went in search of her father. If they find her there is no telling what they will do to her." Shelly looked about at the riders. "She's only nineteen; we've kept her hidden from them till now; please?" Her concern showed in her pleading face and voice.

Trey was touched by her concern; something in him was moved and he decided to do something, "I'll find her," he said in a deep voice, "which direction did she go?"

"The forest over there at the base of the mountain," Shelly pointed. "She's headed towards the mines in the forest; she knows every back trail on the mountain. I just hope she doesn't get caught."

Trey and Mariah took to the skies and were off in a flash.

"You think I should go with him Steve," Andy asked.

"Andy, I have a feeling that boy doesn't need anyone's help," Steve watched them rise up to the heights. "Jake says he possesses great power, but more important, he understands the responsibility of wielding it."

Trey and Mariah flew over the forest and around the mountain from the heights. Trey scanned the area and picked up on the girl as they moved about the backside of the mountain. He could see her bright golden aura shining thru the trees. He also saw what was waiting in the woods ahead of her; his stomach crawled with disgust. He was not restricted by the code of the dragons; so he decided to make contact with her immediately.

Charlie, can you hear me? Slow down, there are dark figures ahead. Trey observed from above as her pace slowed. He waited until she looked above at him and Mariah. *Yes, that's right Charlie; I'm talking to you telepathically. We've been sent by Jake to rescue your town.*

Am I really... are you talking to me? Her voice sounded scared to Trey, yet it held strength.

Yes I am, Charlie. Shelly told us of your escape from the gym and why you came here. Up ahead are some very dark figures. Pull back, turn around and head for the open field back the way you came. Mariah and I will land and we can meet properly.

Mariah silently glided into the opening and sat down. No sooner was she on the ground than Trey saw Charlie headed his way and he was thunderstruck.

Mariah noted his reaction and chuckled.

Tray stared at her with a silly grin on his face. Her soft brown hair was flying in the wind, her face alive with joy as she ran into the opening. When he saw her eyes he was lost; blue-grey, almost translucent; wide in delight at the sight of Mariah. She ran right up to her without hesitation showing no fear at all.

“Hi,” she said just as friendly as could be, reaching out her hand, “I’m Charlie!”

Mariah chuckled and lowered her head to the girl greeting her as an old friend - much to the dismay of her rider.

Trey climbed down off Mariah and went her, “Hi, my name is Trey. And this is my sister Mariah... oops! Sorry,” he said thumping his head, “I’m supposed to say, Lady Mariah is my companion.”

Charlie shook his hand and curtsied. Turning she looked at Mariah, *oh you are gorgeous*, she excitedly told Mariah. *I was told that the dragons were a sight to see, but nothing could have prepared me for this.* She threw her hands about Mariah’s lowered head and continued, *you are so beautiful, Lady Mariah.*

And you Charlene have very good taste, yes indeed you do. Mariah chuckled nudging Charlie, who laughed and glowed, much to Trey’s enjoyment.

Please, said Charlie kissing Lady Mariah’s nose, *my friends call me Charlie.*

All right you two, enough with the love fest; we’ve got to get outta here quick.

Trey was secretly delighted that Charlie wasn’t afraid of Lady Mariah.

Charlie, would you please inquire of Lady Mariah if she would consent to give you a ride. It’s dragon protocol and has to do with polite manners.

Trey, my brother, I have already agreed to give our sister, Charlie, a ride, said Mariah as she extended her wing to the girl. Trey looked at Charlie, and then at Lady Mariah. *Sister!*

Shaking his head he climbed up to his seat and turned and offered Charlie his hand. He lifted her up onto Mariah’s wing and she took a seat behind him. Her unabashed enthusiasm at riding Mariah held Trey’s attention and he found her very appealing. She had a beautiful glow about her and he made up his mind that he wanted to get to know her better.

He turned to her and instructed her, “When we are in flight, if you have anything to say just think it. Do you understand?”

She shook her head and as Lady Mariah began to take off, slipped her arms tightly around Trey’s waist and leaned against him and held on. A new sensation filled Trey and he decided that he definitely wanted to get to know this girl better.

Oh my God, Oh my God! This is so fantastic! Oh you are so lucky to be able to do this all the time.

She rambled on and on as her excitement grew.

My dear, calm yourself so you may enjoy the journey, said Lady Mariah in a soft voice.

Oh my goodness Lady Mariah, it is so wonderful, she answered excitedly.

Yes my dear, now you must concentrate and think clearly. Lady Mariah's voice was very calm and it was having the desired effect. Look below and direct us towards the area of the mines.

Charlie looked below and studied the ground; she spotted the path to the log house and knew they were getting close.

I believe just over that small hill up ahead is where the mines begin.

Ok Charlie, now I need you to be quiet for a bit while I concentrate, Trey told her.

Mariah flew over the area in a wide circle. Charlie pinpointed the log cabin and the trail leading to the mines. She told Trey she was certain that the men were being kept there. Lady Mariah picked up speed and then glided down and around the entire area silently. Trey concentrated as they flew over the area, and then he began to speak in disjointed sentences:

Three openings into the ground...

Large gates over the openings, booby-trapped...

Fear, great fear...

There are at least twenty, no... thirty... thirty-five.

Four guards in a small hut;

Two sleeping, two playing cards...

Trey was silent for a bit more and suddenly broke the silence, *we have to get back to Steve and let him know what we found, Mariah. I fear that the others will come back here and kill everyone.*

Charlie squeezed Trey around the waist and leaned her body against his back as they turned and flew back to the town.

You think they are coming back here, don't you? You think they are going to try to kill everyone. I can feel it, I know there's more; don't lie to me.

Yes I do Charlie... but I also think we can stop them.

Privately he thought she showed surprising empathy. She correctly picked up on his feelings about the situation; there was more to this girl than he thought. He found himself drawn to her like no other.

And I to you Trey, she said so softly that it almost seemed as if the words were floating about him.

As they neared the party of dragons and riders Trey could see Jake himself in the distance approaching them with a large band of dragons. Mariah settled on the ground and they dismounted and joined Steve and Andrew.

Jake landed and the now freed townspeople gathered about him thanking him for saving them from almost certain death. Jake called to Trey and asked what he had found. Trey related everything and Jake was quiet for a moment.

Our first order of business is to free the men in the mines. Then we will set up a welcoming committee for the returning hoard. He rose up and looked at the people gathered there. *What say you?*

Yes! “Yes, we want to help!” They shouted out.

Good! Then let us begin with freeing the men. Trey, this is what I would like you to do... he began.

Two hours later the men were free, and the thugs left behind by Dixon were dead. Charlie’s father had been killed weeks before just as she had feared. She had prepared herself for this and took the news well. The people returned to their homes agreeing to meet in the morning to plan a welcoming committee for the returning thugs.

Charlie sought out Trey’s company. Now that her father was gone, there was nothing to keep her in the town any longer. The dreams had showed her visions of Trey and Lady Mariah; and she knew with a certainty that her future lay with them. She found Trey and Mariah sitting on a nearby hill and joined them.

Mariah was pleased she had sought them out. *I am sorry that your father was killed Charlie, I wish to give you comfort.* Mariah asked her softly, *have you any family here?*

No Lady Mariah, there is no one left to keep me here. She sighed deeply; *I would like to go with you and Trey.* Charlie turned and looked into the face of a startled Trey and smiled, *that is - if Trey will have me.*

“What... whoa... I... um...” Trey stuttered; she had caught him completely off guard. He stood there dumbfounded for a moment and then looked into Charlie’s blue-grey eyes and suddenly knew with a certainty that she was for him. *I wouldn’t have it any other way Charlie,* he said and smiled shyly.

Good, she chuckled quickly, *I didn’t want to have to wrestle you down and force you.*

Mariah raised her head back and chuckled loudly, *I would really like to see that happen.*

Okay, okay, is this how it’s going to be with you two? Trey asked with a smile looking up at Mariah and back at Charlie, who broke up laughing.

Then he reached out and pulled Charlie to him and kissed her softly on the lips before he lost his courage or she could protest. He held her to him in a hug and whispered, “I’ve wanted to do that ever since I saw you running thru the forest.”

Smiling, Charlie remembered her dreams, and replied, “It took you long enough,” and raised her head and kissed him back. Mariah saw the red glow about both their bodies and shot a flame into the air. She roared ‘approval’ loudly, much to the surprise of the other dragons.

Evansville had the marauders on the run. Just as Daowyn had predicted they began to see the futility of their situation and made a run for it. Daniel and Jake took to the air with the rest of the dragons and began to dog their trail. Jake instructed Joe to take some men and chase them on foot.

There must be no stragglers, he told him, and it must be a clean sweep. We can never allow this to happen again. Rhontin will cover you and your men from above.

Then he and Daniel and several dragons headed towards Walkersville.

Joe and Stuart picked the best and most fierce men and prepared to go after them. Stuart had climbed to the top of the fence and was rallying the men about him when two shots rang out. A sniper high on the mountain was firing, picking off people. Stuart took a bullet in his chest and his upper thigh. He went down with a loud thud, much to the shock of everyone.

“Stuart – nooo...!” Joe shouted running towards him, shocked at seeing his friend go down.

Viewing the entire scene from her perch on Daowyn’s shoulder, Amy had her women concentrate on the area where the shots came from and they let loose barrage after barrage of arrows. One of them found its mark and the man fell screaming with an arrow in his throat; he didn’t scream long.

Miranda saw Stuart fall and screamed his name; eyes wide with fear, she ran to his side. She didn’t care what anyone thought; she just cared about Stuart. She immediately pressed her hand to his massive chest to stop the flow of blood all the while directing Joe to make a tourniquet around his leg. She applied a pressure bandage one of the men had handed her to his chest and called for a stretcher.

“Hey little one,” Stuart said in a tightly controlled voice, “I’m going to be just fine. It takes more than this to put me down,”

“You may be big, but you are not invincible, Mr. Stuart.” She continued with tears in her eyes, “You have a serious chest wound, your lung could collapse.” She smiled at him and bent close saying in a soft voice, “I don’t want to lose you, not now; not when I just found you.”

Stuart realized then that she was as interested in him as he was in her. “My brave honey colored goddess, news like that will keep my old heart pumping for a long, long time.” He reached up and placed his large hand over hers and smiled.

It took four men to carry him to the infirmary, and Miranda didn’t leave his side. She remembered how he had saved her from Dixon; how he had come by every day as she healed from her wound, inquiring how she was doing. She had seen him watching her from a distance as she trained with Amy’s women. This gentle giant had been looking after her; he had never said anything, but she knew; and it made her heart sing with possibilities.

After Stuart was taken away to the infirmary, Joe took off with his men and was soon joined by Amy and fifteen of her women. They were not about to be denied a chance to put an end to these devils. The look of determination on their faces told Joe not to argue the point. Having learned from Victoria’s fierce resolve, he knew better than to say anything.

Back at Dragons Hill, Sam was preparing meals for the large groups of people that seemed to keep flowing into the Great Hall. The new man, Johnson, made everything a lot easier. He had come in with the last group of people and seemed to genuinely want to be of help. He set himself to work without complaint, and did any job asked of him. Sam was happy to finally have someone who appreciated the effort that went into preparing meals for the large groups. He had even suggested that they make box lunches and carry them to the dragon riders in the field. Sam hadn't even thought of that, and he had to admit it was great idea.

Sam had called to Jake and asked him to send a rider back to the plateau to pick up the food and take it to them. Johnson had helped Sam carry the large boxes filled with sandwiches and bottles of water to the plateau. He was courteous with the dragon rider and handed the boxes to Sam and helped tie the large boxes to the dragon's wings. He was polite and offered that he hoped he had not tied the boxes too tight and caused discomfort to Andrew's, Lady Ariel. She assured him that she felt no discomfort and thanked him for his concern.

At that point Johnson broke down and seemed overwhelmed at hearing the gentle voice of Lady Ariel. Sam explained that it was probably the first time he had ever spoken with a dragon and it was just too overwhelming to the man. Both Andrew and Lady Ariel said they understood, and were soon on their way.

Sam led Johnson off the plateau and reassured him that many reacted the same way when they first heard a dragon's voice speaking to them.

"It was just so unexpected," said Johnson, "her voice was so soft, so gentle. I guess I was unprepared." He gave a short laugh and wiped his eyes.

Sam patted him on the back and told him to think nothing of it. He wasn't about to say anything to anyone; it was no ones business anyway.

Sam thought to himself, *the poor man has probably been thru a lot; like all of us. He most likely heard of the dragons and all; but to see them up close. Ah, and to hear them speak... It was just too much for him.*

They returned to the Great Hall and continued with preparations for the meals.

Neither man had seen the dark shadow that followed them.

With Beth's Rhontin spotting from above, Joe and his men were directed to the hiding bands of marauders in the forest. Thor and a large band of wolves soon joined them. They ferreted out many men hiding in bands of two or three; Joe and his men dispatched them immediately. Many pleaded for their lives; but there was no mercy for these men.

Joe had his group band out in three large groups and push up over the mountain and down the opposite side. They could see the large force before them on the open plain being hunted down by the dragons Jake had set on their trail. Sometime around midnight Joe called for a halt. His men were bone tired, and so was he. They needed food and water, and at least a couple hours rest. Andrew called to him that he had food and water and requested a landing.

"Ah Andrew, you are most welcome," Joe told him as he dismounted and began to hand over large boxes of food and drink.

"It looks like you have them on the run Joe," he told him enthusiastically. "You may spend the next several days getting them all, but it will be worth the effort to finally rid the world of such men."

"I agree with you on that Andrew, but right now my men need some rest," Joe gestured to the tired men behind him lying on the ground. "Can we get cover while we sleep for a couple of hours; and maybe more ammo if possible?"

I don't see why not. In case you guys haven't noticed, you've been at for a little over eight hours. We've been wondering when you would stop for a bit." Andrew smiled at Joe, "I think you've earned it."

"I just worry that they will get too far ahead of us." Joe wiped his bloody and soot splattered face with a cloth. "I don't want to chance losing any of them. We have to get them all, and we have to do it now. I don't fancy doing this again five or ten years from now."

"Rhontin will keep pace with them, and if needs be, we'll fly your group to them. They've entered the forest up ahead and I believe they are doing the same as you. But they don't have the luxury of food and drink. They are just about spent."

"That makes them all the more dangerous," said Amy joining them. "Andrew," she said nodding to him, "thanks for the food and water."

Andrew nodded in her direction and gently tapped the sword on her back, "Lady Amy, you and your fighters were quite a sight to see this afternoon; all the dragons are talking about it. They were very excited and have accorded you the honor of 'Lady'. They all say that you have the heart of a dragon in battle and fight like the Amazons of old. Coming from them, it is quite an honor."

Amy blushed and stammered, "I... I am overwhelmed Andrew; I had no idea. We were just doing what had to be done."

Andrew laughed, "Well you do it very well, Lady Amy, I salute you."

With that he walked over to Lady Ariel and standing beside her, bowed low. Lady Ariel rose and bent her head to Amy in respect. Tears in her eyes, Amy ran forward and threw her arms around Lady Ariel's lowered head in gratitude and all could hear a deep purring.

Andrew finished unloading the boxes of food and water and took to the skies. Joe and Amy joined their small tired party.

"You need to rest Lady Amy," Joe said putting his hand on Amy's shoulder and smiling for effect, "and I mean rest." Joe turned to the rest of his men, "everyone get a few hours of shut-eye. The dragons will keep watch over us."

Amy joined the women and they were full of questions. She related all that Andrew had said and what the dragons thought of them.

Karen, the tall redhead was very matter of fact about it all. "They just recognize fellow warriors. It's in their nature to acknowledge it."

Toni, the brown-haired girl with the dark green eyes replied, "yeah, but I bet we looked scary as hell to those bastards. Did you see them run once we took out their leaders; man what a rush."

"Okay, enough you two; let's quiet down and get a little sleep. I have a feeling tomorrow is going to be a long, long, day." Amy rolled over and pulled the blanket around her and was soon sound asleep.

Joe added more wood to the fire, checked with the sentries, and then settled in, pulling the blanket about his body; he was soon fast asleep. While he slept dreams told him where he would find men hiding; they also warned of booby-traps waiting for him and his men in the forest.

In the kitchen, back at Dragons Hill, Sam drew a deep breath and sat down; he was bone tired. Never had he worked so hard, and without the help of Johnson it would have been impossible to get all those meals boxed and out to the dragon riders. Plus, they still had to prepare meals and feed Dragons Hill. He was grateful for the help the man offered, but something about the man just didn't seem right.

Maybe I'm just too suspicious about everyone. Maybe I need to lighten up, he thought guiltily to himself.

Sam called it a night and asked Johnson to join him at the back of the kitchen. Sam reached out and removed a stone out of a small alcove and pulled out a bottle of his best whiskey. Getting out two cups, he offered Johnson a drink.

"We certainly earned our supper today; I can't remember when I was so busy." Sam took a long drink. "Go home and get some sleep man," he told Johnson, "you worked very hard today. I couldn't have got everything done without your help."

"You know, for the first time I felt useful Sam," Johnson said placing his hand on Sam's shoulder and giving it a slight squeeze, "thanks for letting me help; I felt part of the team."

"We all feel that way in time, you go and get some rest and I'll see you tomorrow morning." Sam told him as they walked out of the Great Hall. Sam watched him walk away and then remembered something Jake had said.

Johnson went to his cave, fell on his bed, and sighed deeply. He was exhausted, but it was well worth the effort. Sam thought he was a fine person; exactly what he wanted him to think. He drifted off to sleep thinking of all that had happened. His dreams were filled with conflicting emotions, and he tossed and turned for the better part of the night. Finally he fell into a deep sleep and quieted.

He did not hear the dark shadow as it entered his cave and walked about his bed sniffing.

Daniel and Jake returned to Dragons Hill before sunrise the next morning. Jake had left the town of Walkersville in Steve and Andrew's capable hands. They would take care of any of the marauders who made it back.

Jerry was waiting on the mesa for them when they landed. *Welcome back, I take it your trip was successful.*

Yes Jerry, and your little surprises will be waiting for them when they cross the river, said Jake with a chuckle.

What surprises? Asked Daniel looking at Jake and then at Jerry.

Jerry laughed, well; it was Jake's idea. Your see they have to pass through a small rocky pass to get to Walkersville. Let's just say I left a few booby-traps of my own for them. If any make it thru that, they won't be in any condition to face the welcoming committee that'll be waiting for them.

You two are dangerous when you get together, Daniel chuckled, but if it will finally rid us of them then I say, good for you.

Oh, before I forget Daniel, Kurt said to pass this along to you. He's been picking up some chatter on his short wave radio. Jerry looked Daniel and grinned, he thinks it may be coming from Thunder Mountain.

Really, Daniel's mind raced ahead; you think Les could be sending it?

Well, Jerry said with a sly smile, he said they're asking for a Major Sherman.

After all this time, Daniel scratched his head, Jerry; you think maybe Les is still alive? Maybe things changed inside for the good.

Well Daniel, Jerry placed his hand on Daniel's shoulder; Les is the only one who knew you left to follow the instructions from your dreams. And if he's trying to find you, well old man, he could be following his dreams.

Gentlemen, Jake interrupted; your questions will be answered soon enough. A small group is making their way to Wallace. They are from your Thunder Mountain Daniel; I have instructed Bill to feed them and let them rest. He will bring them here in two days.

Why don't we just fly over and pick them up? Jerry asked Jake.

Daniel quickly replied, because it would be better to observe them for a day or so. We both know what the military was like in the mountain, Jerry. We could be dealing with them; this way we find out before hand. Jerry smiled and shook his head knowingly, agreeing with Daniel.

In a small town that had sprung up not but twenty-five miles from Dragons Hill, three soldiers slowly approached the barricade across the road. Those on guard duty had sent for their leader the minute they saw the men approaching from a mile away; they had been expecting them.

“Hello in there, we come in peace; we mean you no harm,” shouted the sergeant leading the group. “We just need a safe place to spend the night and we’ll be on our way in the morning.” He waited for a reply and then added, “Please don’t let our appearance put you off; we’ve been on the road for a long time. We come from...”

“Thunder Mountain!” boomed a deep voice, “We know sergeant, and we have been expecting you.” The barricade opened and a large man stepped out smiling, “Come in gentlemen, lady,” he bowed with a flourish, “come in please, don’t be shy, we don’t bite.”

The three soldiers looked at each other and then the sergeant shrugged his shoulders and said, “why not, the dreams said we should come here and rest.”

Bill noted that they all looked tired, soul-weary tired. Their clothes were dirty and torn, their boots old and no doubt threadbare. Their faces had that hollow look; he had seen that look on many who came to town. They had seen too much death; too much inhumanity. Most likely they had run into the marauders once or twice while on the road. That in itself was enough to give a man that look. The dreams said they were ready, and led them here.

Jake himself had instructed Bill to bring them to Dragons Hill after a days rest.

Kurt sat in his hut built high on the south rim. A balding man in his forties, quiet and shy, he was the type that blended into the woodwork when in a group. He had one passion in his life; he had been an avid short-wave ham operator before the Great Burning. He managed to get his equipment to safety before the monsters hit his city. Since joining Dragons Hill, he had set up a listening post on the South Rim to see if there were any more survivors out there. Over the years he had managed to pick up a few of his old radio friends; three in Canada, two in Japan, and a lonely Boris, in Siberia. Now he was picking up short messages from somewhere nearby. They were very garbled and he reasoned that whoever was sending the message was low on power. The bursts were very short, but they were definitely asking for help.

Daniel came into the hut, "Hey Kurt, Jerry said you're getting something; asking for me by name."

"Hello Daniel," Kurt looked up at him and smiled, "yes I am, but I think they're low on power. Every hour or so they send out a burst, but it's too short to get a good track on it. It's coming from somewhere within a 600 mile radius; I thought maybe it's from Thunder Mountain."

Both men heard the urgent call of a hawk high above. Daniel stepped out of the hut and looked above. "It's one of the hawks Adam set up for communication between the outlying towns and Dragons Hill."

Daniel stepped into the open and waved his arms wide and then stood still, arms outstretched. The hawk circled for moment and then the large bird began to descend. It landed on Daniel's arm and keened once; bending its head it released the message holder and took off again. Daniel took the small leather holder and opened it and read.

"It's from Wallace; says they have three visitors from Thunder Mountain. Says they are looking for the "dragon riders" they have heard about."

Jake... did you get all this? Daniel called immediately.

I am aware Daniel; Jake answered and added, just as I told you, they will be brought to Dragons Hill for questioning.

Daniel had Kurt write a short message indicating they were to be brought to Dragon's Hill and then called to the hawk circling above. He placed the message in the small leather tube and tied it back in the holder on the bird's chest.

"Home you go my brave friend," he said as he lifted his arm and propelled the bird into the air. He turned around and said to no one in particular; "It should take them about two days to get here by foot; time enough for this present situation to be over and done with." Jerry agreed nodding his head. Daniel turned to Kurt, "Keep an ear up for any other messages from our mysterious friends, Kurt."

"Sure thing Daniel," Kurt waved as Daniel went back down the path.

In Wallace, the three soldiers were led to a small lean-to shelter that rested against a mountain. They could see further down the poorly lit path that there was a dirt road up ahead and there were many houses and a large building resembling a barn. Thomas realized that this was a farm that had been turned into a community. The ‘house’ they were led to appeared to be nothing but an old shed, just shelter from the elements. Once inside they saw that the shed was for show only as a passage led beyond to a cave at the rear. In it were three cots, with pillows and blankets on them, and a nice cozy fire going to warm the interior; they had been expected.

“You can bunk here for the night.” The large man stood and waited while they stowed their gear in the cave. “My name is Bill, I sort of run things around here.” He extended his hand to the sergeant, “and you are?”

“Wilson,” the young man said taking Bill’s hand and shaking, “Sgt Thomas Wilson, sir.” Bill had an iron grip to his hand and Thomas was sure it was for effect; just to let him know they were not a bunch of country bumpkins.

“No need to be formal around here son, Thomas it is.” Bill smiled and indicated the two other soldiers, “and your friends?” he asked.

“Oh yes,” Thomas motioned the other two soldiers forward, “uh, this is Julie, and Mark. We’ve been on the road for almost a year now; we’ve seen quite a bit out there. And also heard stories about these mysterious dragon riders; how they put an end of the monsters that burned up our world. We’re trying to find them and their camp.”

“Later son, that will come later, right now we’ve been asked to feed you and see that you get a good nights rest.” Bill beckoned them to follow as he left the shelter.

Bill led the newcomers to the center of the town and bade them enter the barn. When they opened the doors various aromas assailed their noses immediately. Bill smiled as he saw their reactions. Before them was a sight they had not seen in a very long time. Rows of tables were lined up and there were people of all races and sizes sitting and talking among themselves. As they entered the building there was a sudden hush and the people all turned and looked at them. Then the silence was broken by calls of welcome from the people to the soldiers.

Bill led them between the long rows to a central area, “grab a tray and join the line.”

“Sir, we don’t want to take your food; we brought our own with us,” Thomas tried to offer.

“Are you daft man? Who would want to eat MRE’s when there is a feast like this before him.” Bill grabbed a plate and stood with the group as they began to go thru the line. Thomas seemed to hesitate until he looked at all the people moving along the serving line.

“My God this is like a dream,” he exclaimed as he looked at his friends.

“We have plenty of food Thomas; Jake made a point to send over extra as he knew you would be arriving soon. Fill your plate and eat as much as you want; and then get a good nights rest. Tomorrow we will take you to Dragons Hill; they will answer your questions.”

“There’s that mysterious ‘Jake’ again, Sarge;” whispered Julie.

Thomas, Julie and Mark were not slow on the uptake and it took no more coaxing when they approached the serving line. They piled their plates high with chicken and mashed potatoes and green beans and biscuits. They followed Bill, carefully balancing their bounty, to a long table and placed their trays on it and sat down. They grabbed their forks and were about to dig in when they noticed Bill remained standing. Not wanting to upset protocol they waited. Bill called the hall to order and the room went silent. Everyone bowed their heads as Bill led the group in a prayer of thanksgiving.

The three soldiers looked at each other and smiled.

Yes, this is the place all right, Thomas thought to himself, the dreams... they were right!
Then they all dug in and ate till they were stuffed.

Joe and his men woke the next morning and began the long task of methodically hunting down the remaining marauders and dispatching them quickly. Duke and his wolves were very helpful ferreting out the hiding men; and between Joe's men and Amy's women, they were dealt with and dispatched quickly. Mile by mile the horde was slowly whittled down to but fifty or so men. These last holdouts gathered together and tried to make a last stand of it. In a fierce fight that lasted several hours they were finally taken out; those found alive were given no quarter. Three of the leaders had slipped away during the fight and made it to the pass, but Jerry's booby-trap devices took care of them.

All the bodies were gathered and piled high in the center of an open field and Rhontin flew over and fired them all to ash.

A recovered Daowyn met up with Joe and his men and offered them a ride back to Evansville, which was accepted with great gusto by Joe's tired men.

Andrew and Lady Ariel offered Lady Amy and her women a ride back and they graciously thanked her for thinking about them.

Joe returned to a hero's welcome from the townsfolk but he refused their lauds saying that they all did it together as a family. He checked on Stuart straight away and found him in Miranda's capable hands. The smile on Stu's face told Joe everything and he was glad for his friend. He told him he would be back after dinner and fill him in on everything that happened.

He saddled up Molly and rode out checking the fences around the town and talked to the men he had left in charge. They gave him the details of those who had fallen and those who had been injured. They had done pretty well losing only about twenty-two men.

One of his men named Chuck rode up and called to him, "Joe, we found something up on the mountain back there." Turning his horse around and heading up the hill he continued, "I think you're gonna want to see this; you won't believe it."

Joe followed and as he approached he was stunned at the sight before him. There were seven dead men in seven foxholes; weapons lying beside each one. Their faces still held the look of surprise; their throats had been ripped open.

"We figure that they snuck in here two nights ago, and dug in. They were supposed to pick us off during the battle; but something stopped them." He walked a few steps and went down on one knee and indicated a track, "Jack found a few tracks – cats - big ones, Joe."

Joe whistled and said in a soft tone, "Well, Jake said he had our backs covered."

"Ya reckon your dragon friend over there," said Chuck with a nod of his head towards Daowyn, "would consent to firing this trash, if we pile them up?"

"I see no problem there Chuck, I'll ask him." Joe called to Daowyn and asked what Chuck proposed. He received a hearty 'yes' from Daowyn, who rose in the air and made his way to the men.

Pile them up in the clearing over there, Daowyn indicated, I will be happy to get rid of this filth.

Joe instructed his men, “take their weapons and ammo, but burn everything else of theirs. I want no reminder of them or their kind.”

The same was done to the many bodies they removed from the mountain; all were piled up with the men who had fallen on the mile wide plain in front of the barricade. Daowyn fired them all to ash, and also cleared the entire area around the fence surrounding the town. Once it was done he took his leave of Joe.

I must return to Dragons Hill Joe, he explained, my mission here has been completed.

I shall miss you my brave friend, Joe told him sadly, you have enriched my life greatly.

We shall always be connected Joe, that was the price of your enhancement. The large dragon lowered his head, my loyalty is to my rider first; but you shall always be in my heart. If you should ever need me, just call.

Joe threw his arms around the large dragon’s lowered head, *I shall always be grateful for your friendship and the lessons you taught me. You have given me an honor I shall forever treasure.*

The large dragon raised his head and roared ‘approval’ loudly and let loose a large flame into the air. Those around stopped what they were doing and stared at the large dragon, and then at Joe. Then Daowyn rose up into air, circled once, and flew towards Dragons Hill. Joe stood there watching till Daowyn was just a small speck in the sky. Joe turned around to the astonished faces of the men around him.

“Ok gentlemen,” he laughed heartedly, “let’s get our town back to order. Chuck, Jack, round up the riders; we have a herd of cows to bring home.”

Hours later Joe gave a round of orders and then headed to the ranch house; he was dirty and stunk of death. He wanted to clean up and change his clothes. As he walked up to the house he saw Millie on the front porch with the two cougar kittens asleep in her lap. She was snapping green beans into a large colander.

“Well, looks like they made themselves right at home,” he chuckled as he came up the stairs.

“Oh they’ve been no problem Joe; sweet as can be, they are. Their momma hasn’t showed up for them.” Millie smiled and put the colander down on the table. She gently stroked both sleeping kittens, “I hope she’s all right, Joe.”

“Oh don’t worry, she’ll come when she’s ready,” he told her, silently trying to sound optimistic. He hadn’t seen her throughout the battle, and hoped that a stray bullet hadn’t felled her.

“Will Miss Victoria be coming home,” Millie asked, “I mean, now that the battle is over?” Joe knew that Millie was worried about Victoria.

“Jake will send her home when her job is done, Millie.” Joe answered wondering silently when that would be. “He assured me that she was safe,” Joe gently assured Millie patting her shoulder, “so don’t worry. Changing the subject he added, “I need to clean up,” he opened the front door, “I’m sure I reek by now.”

“Well... I wasn’t going to say anything,” Millie laughed as Joe went into the house.

Back at Dragons Hill, Daniel was in the Riders Hall conferring with Jake, *No news yet on this Dixon character, Jake?*

No Daniel and I get heartburn when I think of it. We have been throughout Dragons Hill looking for him. Jake shifted his weight, Dee and Lee Chin say he is still here, they can feel that much; but he has hidden himself well. Our four-legged friend stays close by and on constant alert.

We're going to have to bring Kate and the women back pretty soon, Daniel reminded Jake, any delay and Kate will arrange a way to return on her own. You know how she is Jake...

Yes, I am aware of that Daniel. This last demon confounds me. Jake's voice was agitated and showed his concern. I fear for her safety Daniel.

All we can do is be vigilant Jake, Daniel tried to alleviate his fears; you know Kate can take care of herself. She is not one to be taken lightly.

Jake was silent for a time and Daniel left him be. He knew Jake well enough by now to see he was thinking, formulating a plan of sorts. Jake grunted and lowered his head.

Daniel; perhaps this is a good time to disappear for a couple of weeks. We could visit Valotin and his Queen in Peru and perhaps go on to Europe and see Ichor for several more weeks. Jake paused for effect and then continued. I can leave Steve in charge here; he is very capable of returning things to normal on Dragons Hill. Dee and Lee Chin will remain and keep searching.

Aha, I see what you are going for Jake, Daniel replied quickly, a few weeks away and maybe our mysterious friend will reveal himself.

Precisely Daniel, Jake added, plus I would enjoy some time with my Queen. She has been in my thoughts lately and I long for her long silver neck to be entwined with mine.

Why Jake, if I didn't know any better, Daniel said with a sly smile, I'd think you were horny.

Jake lowered his head to Daniel and stared into his eyes; *and you have not given thought to Kate lying by your side, Jake purred, the feel of her warm naked body next to yours?*

Okay, okay, touché Jake, Daniel blushed at the deeply personal observation Jake had made. I think you are right, a vacation will do all of us good. Plus we can bring Michael and Trey with us. Kate will be overjoyed to find that he is alive.

Good, then we leave after the men arrive from Wallace and we question them. Jake sent out a call to Steve and Andrew and their dragons.

I will make all the preparations and give instructions to Steve and Andrew. Jake shifted his position and sighed. I shall also send Lady Victoria home; we can no longer use the strategy we planned. I am sure Joe will be pleased to have her with him again.

Speaking of Joe, Daniel added, he handled himself very well throughout this entire ordeal. His people rallied and held the line against overwhelming odds.

Jake agreed adding, he will become an important part of our future as we rebuild this world of ours.

Well, Daniel continued, he's a born leader Jake. With people like him, our future looks pretty good

As long as we never forget what brought us to this point, Daniel, Jake said solemnly.

Applying lotion and talcum powder to his chapped skin, Joe was beginning to feel human again. The shower had felt great, getting rid of the dirt and blood had removed the smell of death and buoyed his spirits. As he dressed his thoughts drifted to Victoria; he missed her lying next to him in the early morning. He hoped her stay at Dragons Hill would not be much longer. He finished dressing and walked out to the kitchen. Millie was at the counter preparing a sandwich for Joe.

“Want some sweet tea Joe? It was freshly made this morning,” she asked.

“Thanks Millie,” he stepped back and looked around, “say, where are the kittens?”

“Oh they curl up by the fireplace most of the time,” Millie indicated pointing to the living room. “I put a big basket over there with an old pillow wrapped in a blanket in it; it’s their favorite spot.” Changing the subject, Millie laid her hand on Joe’s arm, “Joe, how is Stuart doing? I heard what happened.”

“I stopped in and spoke to Doc before I came here; he says Stu will pull thru just fine. He’s going to need a lot of recuperation; he took several bullets. And Millie,” Joe said with a smile, “I think he’s finally found someone.” Joe told Millie what had happened in the heat of battle when Stuart was hit and how Miranda had rushed to his side.

“Well it’s about damn time!” Mille exclaimed, hands on her hips, “That man is a hell of a catch for any woman. From what I hear this Miranda is a real spunky one; she kept Jake informed on what was going on right under those devil’s noses.” Millie laughed and looked at Joe, “a perfect match for Stuart, feisty and smart!”

Joe and Millie sat and ate lunch, Joe filling Millie in on all that had happened during the battle. She was very interested in his description of Amy and her women warriors. She marveled at the courage of all the townspeople. Two hours later and Millie knew all of the details of the final battle.

Joe headed out to check the town and pay a visit to Stuart. He knew his friend would be champing at the bit to learn all the details of the battle. Miranda was still with him and Joe spent an hour bringing him up to speed. As he left the doctor’s he looked up and saw a speck headed towards Evansville.

Suddenly Joe heard Daowyn calling happily, *my friend, I am returning a precious gift to you. Jake says thank you very much.*

Joe turned and headed towards the circling dragon, grinning from ear to ear. He was circling around for a landing in the field behind the ranch house. As Daniel ran past the house he called out, “Millie, Daowyn is calling; I believe he is returning Victoria home.”

Hearing Joe, Millie rose and made for the back door swinging it open just as Daowyn circled above.

Joe watched as the large dragon circled and landed. Lady Victoria dismounted and ran around to the dragon and hugged his lowered head thanking him for returning her home. There was a deep purring sound echoing about. She turned and saw Joe coming towards her and she ran to his open arms. Joe swept her up in his arms and swung her about.

“Victoria! Oh God I have missed you woman.” Holding her to him, he whispered in her ear, “I have longed for the feel of you by my side,” Joe looked into her eyes, “and other wonderful things I shall mention later.” They kissed passionately, oblivious to their surroundings.

Joe let her go and looked at the large dragon. *Thank you for returning her to me Daowyn, Joe bowed deeply; once again I am in your debt.*

Your joy is enough thanks Joe. I must return to Dragons Hill, good-bye my friend. He was airborne and gone in seconds.

Victoria hugged Joe again and laughed and kissed him, “I missed you more than I thought, Joe, nothing can compare to the feel of your strong touch.” Then she took his arm and they headed for the ranch house. “You must tell me everything; I want to hear all about the battle.” Millie was waiting for her on the back porch. Victoria quickly swept Millie up in her arms and hugged her tightly, “I’m home Millie, and it feels wonderful!”

They went inside and Victoria declared she was famished. Millie busied herself in the kitchen making a sandwich for Vicky. The two kittens came scampering into the kitchen to see what all the noise was about. Upon seeing them Vicky squealed with delight and went down on one knee.

“Oh they are just darling! Are they your cougar’s kittens?” Joe nodded and explained how they arrived just before the battle. The kittens purred loudly and swatted at Vicky’s hands.

After eating heartily, and questioning Joe about the battle, Victoria casually asked how long he thought it would take to get the town up and running again. Joe replied not long at all. Then Vicky casually asked if he would mind if she redid one of the guest rooms down the hallway. Joe replied he would get some men in to help her and he asked what she had in mind.

Victoria smiled and said softly for effect, “Oh, a light blue would do just fine for a nursery, I think.”

Joe stood there staring at Victoria as what she said sunk in. His heart leaped in his chest, his lower bowels felt like they were going to loose; he was literally stunned. He took a halting step forward.

Millie started laughing and clapping her hands.

Victoria smiled and went to Joe taking his arm and patting his shoulder; “There, there Daddy; I didn’t want to shock you like this.”

“Victoria?” Joe’s voice was unnaturally high. He cleared his throat, “are you...? are... we...?” he stuttered. Joe’s throat was suddenly dry as a desert.

“Yes my love, we are going to have a little visitor in about seven months.” Victoria stood on her tiptoes and kissed Joe on the cheek.

Joe suddenly came alive and swept her up in his arms and spun her around.

“Yehaaa! Oh Victoria, I never gave a thought to the possibility. You have given me the best news I’ve heard in a very long time!” Joe put her down and laughed and kissed her and hugged her. Then he held her face in his large hands and said, “Have I told you how much I love you woman?”

Millie came over and hugged Victoria, “the best news ever for these old ears; to rock a wee one again.”

Late that afternoon, Trey and Lady Mariah returned to Dragons Hill with Charlie. Lady Jennie informed Michael that Trey was returning, and he was not alone. She believed he had found a mate. Michael was on the plateau waiting for him when he landed. Trey dismounted and turned and offered his hand to Charlie. She slid off Lady Mariah, ran around to her as Mariah lowered her head and threw her arms around her and kissed her nose. Michael immediately picked up on the familiarity between the dragon and the woman and guessed that Lady Jennie was right; Trey had found a mate.

Trey introduced Charlie to Michael and he found he liked her sweet enthusiasm. Trey inquired of a place for them to stay and Michael directed them to a cave that had been used by others. A quick trip to the warehouse with Michael provided clothes for Charlie and Trey.

When Jake called a couple of hours later and explained of their impending trip to Peru, Trey told him of Charlie and their commitment to each other. Jake asked him to bring her to him. When they arrived at the Riders Hall, Jake saw the strong link between their auras and roared ‘approval’ loudly, exciting Charlie immensely.

Early the next morning as the sun rose over Dragons Hill, Trey and Charlie were on the mesa top. They acknowledged their growing love and pledged their vows to each other as Daniel, Michael, Steve and Jerry, and Andy watched. Lady Mariah stood behind them with her wings spread out loosely wrapped about them.

The dragons all roared ‘Approval’ and shot huge flames of fire into the air. The newlyweds were accorded the next two days to themselves, to explore their new love and each other.

Late in the afternoon of the second day, Bill and his small group made their way to Dragons Hill. As they emerged from the forest Daniel and Steve met them and introductions were made all around. Daniel then led the three soldiers up the mountain to the Riders Hall. On the way all three were frightened, surprised, and then excited to see so many riders and dragons land and take off over the large plateau. The closer they got to the top, the more their excitement grew. As they reached the plateau top they stopped and looked about in awe. Seeing a dragon in the air is one thing; but being on the ground as one lands and stares you in the eye is quite another.

Thomas was the first to say what they were all thinking, "They're intelligent creatures, aren't they Daniel?"

"Yes Thomas, they are, and much, much more; Jake will explain everything." Daniel smiled remembering the feeling of first discovery.

"This Jake we have heard so much of... he must be one hell of a guy!" Thomas said excitedly.

"You have no idea," laughed Daniel.

He led them into the Riders Hall and they marveled at the immense size of it. Their heads turned upward staring at the high ledges circling the inside. Several dragons were perched high above. Jake was in the center of the great cave and rose up to his full height. All three took a quick step back and huddled together, staring in astonishment at the sight before them. Master Jeffery came forward and greeted them warmly. He laughed when he realized that they thought he was Jake. He explained about dragon protocol and how they would converse telepathically with 'Jake'. After the shock wore off, agreements were reached and they were taken before Jake and introductions were made.

Daniel and Steve returned two hours later to a changed group. They were filled with confidence and new hope for the future. Daniel took them below to the Great Hall and questioned them during dinner.

As it turned out, they were indeed from Thunder Mountain. Several years' back there had been an uprising inside, the people demanded change and took control. It was a bit bloody and many were lost, Lester's wife among them. But Lester emerged as a sane voice and a sound negotiator. It naturally followed that he was chosen as one of the main leaders, there were three. He was the one who sent the three soldiers out with instructions to listen to, and follow their dreams.

The dreams had led them across the country for a long hard year. Thomas related the story of all they had seen; the many changes in the land and the many people they met and helped along the way. Small communities were springing up around rural farms; no one seemed willing to return to the large cities; except to strip them bare of anything useful. They had run into marauders several times in their travels and learned that running was the wisest thing to do as far as they were concerned. One particular party they ran into about seven months ago was huge. They figured at least a couple of thousand men; they hid as the army thundered by.

Daniel then informed them about the recent battle and the final destruction of the marauders. Steve suggested that perhaps they should speak with Master Jeffery to get caught up on all that had happened since the Great Burning. Daniel offered to loan them a Town Crier when they returned to Thunder Mountain; it would make it easier to inform the people about all the changes that had taken place. He also offered them a generator to take back with them to help boost the power to their radio. He explained he would be gone for several weeks tending to other communities, but that Steve would be left in charge.

He told them that when he returned he hoped to be able to speak with Lester again. Then the group went to pack for the trip.

In the early morning before they all met on the plateau for the trip, a golden figure approached Jake. Crouched low she circled around him, purring softly, and then she came and sat at his feet.

*The evil one is here... he fools many, but I watch.
He tried to hurt my brother's mate.
He is mine!*

Jake lowered his head to her.
As you wish, my sister.

A few hours later all the travelers were gathered on the mesa. Duffle bags were loaded onto the dragons and all was made ready for the trip. Adam flew to the mesa and joined them much to Charlie's joy. Since learning of all that had taken place, she was looking forward to meeting him and learning his story. He flew to Jake's side, as he would ride with Daniel on Jake thru the Thermals until they arrived over Peru.

Daniel shook hands with Steve, "Hold down the fort Steve, we'll see you in a couple of weeks."

"Don't worry about anything; we are very capable of taking care of Dragons Hill." Steve waved as they rose into the air and took off, heading upwards towards the thermals. When they were out of sight he turned to Jerry and Andy, "Well gentlemen, let's get moving."

Kate woke to the beautiful sound of birds singing their early morning praise. She lay there for a moment listening in gratitude as a ray of sunshine filtered in thru the window and made its way across the room. A deep breath and she inhaled the sweet scent of the many flowers hanging about her bungalow.

What a wonderful way to start the day, she thought to herself as she stretched and yawned. Billy came running into the room and jumped onto the bed.

“Mommy, Mommy; Daddy is coming today,” he exclaimed excitedly.

Kate had learned in the past few days that little Billy was beginning to exhibit the first signs of precognition; psychic awareness of his surroundings. It was Lady Elizabeth who first brought it to her attention. It was in small things; knowing who was at the beach, the arrival of someone new, where the others were hiding when playing a game. And most important, Lady Valeria had informed her that the boy could speak to dragons unaided. And then just last night he had announced at dinner that Lady Emily had a surprise for Adam when he returned from Dragons Hill. Kate was grateful that they had not taken their meal in the main dining hall.

“So you think Daddy is coming today do you?” Kate tickled her son and played ‘kisses and hugs’ with him. He giggled delightedly rolling about the bed.

“Mommy, stop Mommy!” He laughed and giggled twisting and turning about. “It’s true, it’s true! Just ask Queenie, she knows too!”

Kate sat up and directed her thoughts to Queenie and asked her if she knew. Her reply was immediate, *yes Lady Kate, Daniel and my mate will be arriving today. I wanted to keep it a secret so as to surprise you, but little Billy was too quick. He picked up on it when he awoke this morning and there was no stopping his enthusiasm.*

Thank you for telling me Queenie, Kate added with a smile, we will both be happy this night.

Kate turned her attention to Billy, “okay you, up and at it. Come on, let’s get dressed and get some breakfast. This is going to be a happy day.”

She grabbed Billy and threw him in the air and as he bounced on the bed she jumped on him tickling away. He giggled and twisted again in delight and breaking away from her grasp jumped off the bed and ran out of the room. She watched him go and smiled contentedly.

This is what happiness is all about... family; she closed her eyes and directed her thoughts as Jake had taught her. Thank you so much for giving me this second life, my cup truly runneth over.

Just after the noon hour the large group came out of the thermals and began the slow spiral descent to the continent below. During the trip Daniel related an abbreviated version of the story of Adam to Trey and Charlie, as they had not been introduced properly before they left. Both were fascinated by the birdman and his gentle manner, even after all he had gone thru. As they approached Dragons Bay, Adam spread his wings and took to the air as Trey and Charlie watched enthralled.

Lady Mariah was heard to comment; *our new world is full of wondrous things!*

Yes indeed Lady Mariah, Jake chuckled at her remark, indeed it is!

As Adam descended towards Dragons Bay, Lady Arian flew up to meet him roaring a welcoming call loudly. The two flew about each other excitedly in a greeting of equals. Those above were touched by the obvious joy of the two friends greeting. Daniel explained to Trey and Charlie that Lady Arian was the companion of Adam's mate, Lady Emily.

Valotin and James rose up and as they approached, Trey excitedly shouted out with a loud, *Mariah, just look at the size of that fellow!*

He is most impressive Trey; she answered quickly, but powerful though he is... he comes nowhere near the power of the First.

Valotin greeted Jake in the air bidding him welcome to Dragons Bay. *Hail to the First, welcome to Dragons Bay!*

With James on his back, introductions were made and then Jake made a rare request of Valotin. Daniel climbed over to Valotin and rode the rest of the way to the plateau with James, and soon understood why Jake had requested it. Queenie suddenly soared above in a silver flash calling out a greeting to Daniel. Her voice was high pitched and very excited as she flew to her mate. Jake flew about her and off a ways. He waited for her and then the two entwined their long necks and a great purring could be heard across the sky.

Daniel felt Queenie's excitement and his loins begin to react. He immediately looked below and searched for Kate.

Returning to reality for a moment he asked Trey to give him time to prepare Kate for the shock of his return. Trey said he understood, and Michael, sensing his nervousness assured him that she would be shocked at first, but happiness would follow quickly.

As they landed on the plateau Daniel saw Kate running up the pathway. He dismounted and politely bowed and thanked Valotin for the ride. Then he turned and ran towards the pathway just as Kate came over the rise. She was in his arms in seconds and he was never so glad to hold her. They kissed passionately, and then Daniel swung her about in a circle.

"I missed you woman, so much," he told her with a smile, hugging her close.

"I'll show you later just how much I missed you," she replied with a sly smile.

They embraced again and Trey ‘felt’ their love, it was so clear and so strong. Then Trey turned towards Michael and watched.

Michael dismounted as he spotted Lady Sally coming onto the plateau. They ran to each other and embraced; kisses and hugs followed. Lady Jennie took to the air when she heard Rah calling for her; they entwined their necks and flew towards the sea.

Valotin welcomed Lady Mariah personally and bade her join his dragons diving into the water near the beach. Inquiring of Trey if he minded, she gladly said yes and flew off only to be met by Lady Arian and Adam, much to her delight.

Trey and Charlie stood on the plateau hand and hand watching the reunion. Trey watched in total fascination at the interplay between Daniel and Kate, a large grin on his face. *She’s so young and so beautiful*, he thought to himself, but he could still see his old ‘Me-Maw’ in her face and mannerisms.

Kate and Daniel walked over to Lady Sally and Michael. Kate greeted Michael with a big hug, ruffling his hair as she told him how glad she was to see him again. Then she began to tell Daniel and Michael all about the young boys, Billy and Taylor. Like a true ‘grandmother’ she went on and on for a bit and they all laughed at her enthusiasm. Then she changed the subject and asked both about the battle. She wanted to hear everything, every detail. She could see that Jake would be busy for a while with his Queen.

They promised to give her details of the battle but first they had some news. Then they told her they brought a new rider with them and explained how Trey and Lady Mariah had showed up. They told her of the closeness of the two and Trey’s healing abilities. Kate glanced up and saw Trey standing there with a big grin on his face. She disengaged herself from the group and turned her full attention towards him.

Just like my dream... she thought to herself.

She began walking towards him and faintly heard Daniel calling to her. Trey stepped forward a few paces and waited. The morning clouds parted and a single ray of sunlight burst thru and highlighted Trey. His hair radiated the deep red auburn color, his face clearly accented by his freckles.

Kate stared and suddenly her eyes went wide. She held her breath; she dared not believe what she was thinking...

She stepped forward again hesitantly.

When she spoke it was a trembling whisper... “Trey...?”

She went to him hesitantly and stared at his face; *so familiar....* Slowly she ran her fingers thru his hair; she traced the freckles on his face; and then saw the scar on his neck. Her heart leaped and she almost jumped.

“Trey...?” She asked as her eyes filled with tears.

Trey grinned and answered confidently, “Me-Maw!” He took a step towards her.

A moment of hesitation and then Kate threw her arms around Trey. They locked in an embrace and spun each other around. There were kisses, and questions flying, and then they just stood there facing each other, smiling.

Suddenly there was a loud roar of approval from the beach area.

“That was Mariah, she’s happy for us,” Trey told her.

“I look forward to meeting her,” Kate said holding Trey’s hand. Trey introduced Kate to Charlie and explained that they had just been married two days ago. She was delighted for them both and embraced Charlie and welcomed her to the family.

“Well so much for preparing her,” Michael said sarcastically elbowing Daniel.

Kate turned to Daniel, “you knew? You knew and didn’t tell me?”

“Kate,” he said raising his hands defensively, “It all just happened this past week. We were coming to tell you, to prepare you...”

Kate threw herself into Daniel’s arms. “You big lug, did you think I wouldn’t recognize my own grandson?” Everybody broke up laughing.

“This calls for a celebration,” Kate decided to prepare a welcoming feast for the evening.

Lady Elizabeth took Trey and Charlie on a tour of Dragons Bay and introduced them around to everyone. She also prepared a secluded bungalow that had not been used in a while and told them to consider it their honeymoon oasis while they were visiting. After settling in they changed clothes and ran down to the beach to join the other riders.

Lady Emily was sitting on the back porch dozing when Adam returned. He quietly descended onto the grassy lawn and slowly walked over to the sleeping Emily. She looked so peaceful, and so beautiful he thought. He gently bent down and kissed her softly on the lips.

She smiled and opened her eyes and looked at him. "Welcome home my love," she said softly raising her arms around his neck. He lifted her up and kissed her again.

"I didn't realize how much I would miss you Emily," he said in a deep voice. "You have been in my thoughts constantly for the past few days. I couldn't stay away any longer."

Emily smiled, disengaged herself and opened her robe, Adam stared at her naked body, as she turned sideways cupping her small protruding belly.

Adam's mouth dropped open, as he suddenly understood. He stared at a smiling Emily in disbelief.

"Are you... can we...? Emily...?"

Emily smiled and nodded.

"Hoo-hoo!" shouted Adam in delight, rising into the air.

The birds in Emily's garden took to the air and rose and dove in joy with Adam. Adam picked Emily up in his arms and kissed her and flew back and forth in excitement. Suddenly realizing what he was doing, Adam stopped and put her down carefully. He stared at Emily and gently touched her small belly.

"Oh Em... I never thought we could...."

...Have you seen Nigel yet?

...Does Valotin know, or Lady Arian?"

She told Adam she had gone to Valotin first, to share the news.

Of course Lady Arian had known all along.

Adam rattled on and on and finally took a deep breath, and looked at Emily and smiled. She was laughing at his reaction to the news.

"You are so beautiful right now Em. I didn't think it possible to love you more than I do, but you have given me reason to soar to the heavens. Oh Emily," Adam kissed her again and held her to him wrapping his wings about her.

Two weeks later the entire populace of Dragons Bay knew that Lady Emily was expecting. Nigel was informed and promised to take great care of Emily. He would keep copious notes, as this would be a first. It was decided that when Emily was five months along they would pay a visit to Lady Sarah. Her hospital was up and running and they would be able to perform an ultrasound, to check the baby. Of course, everyone wondered if the baby would have wings like his father. Adam and Emily didn't care, as long as he was healthy.

Valotin alone knew only one of the twins she was carrying would be a flyer like his father.

Two weeks later, Jake and Queenie, Rah and Lady Jennie, and Lady Mariah left Dragons Bay on a happy note. Their visit had been a resounding success for all parties. They rose above and headed towards the Thermals that would take them to Austria where they would visit Ichor and Lady Isabol at their home base, Dragons Mount. Ichor had been overjoyed at the news of their impending visit and had spread word to his people.

As they came out of the thermals and spiraled down they could see a large crowd waiting for them. Word had spread like wildfire that the fabled First was coming for a visit. The people thronged to the grassy plateau to get a glimpse of him and Kate and Daniel. Jake was taken aback by the large crowd, and could hear Ichor laughing at his dismay.

I told you my people were thankful Jake, he shouted proudly, now you can see for yourself.

We are humbled Ichor, Jake replied lowering his head in a salute to Ichor, truly humbled. Please let your people know we are very pleased at this gracious greeting.

Jake landed and all dismounted and waited for the proper protocol before moving. Ichor approached Jake and bowed, as was fitting, and called out a loud greeting, which was relayed to all. A great cheer went up from the people and they thronged about Jake. Their hearts were filled with good wishes and cheer, and Jake could see that it was a good choice indeed to put Ichor in charge of Europe.

Soon a pathway was opened amid the throng and a very pregnant Lady Sarah made her way to Jake with Jackson by her side. She welcomed them all to Dragons Mount and informed Jake she was carrying twins. He replied she and Jackson were blessed indeed; twin boys would be joining their hearth soon. After a bit Sarah and Jackson called for the crowd to disperse; there would be plenty of time for all to visit with Jake. She led Kate and Daniel and the rest of the group to the castle and helped them settle in before the evening.

Jackson informed them all that a large feast had been planned for the evening in the middle of town. The people had decided that on their own; and furthermore, they had scoured the countryside for the largest and fattest elk and herded them to a small valley close by; the dragons would feast also; Jake was very impressed.

Gathered in the castle grand hall, they all seated themselves before a huge fireplace. Questions soon began flying about the happenings at Dragons Hill. Talk drifted to the final battle and Daniel filled them in on everything that had happened. All listened in rapt attention to the details of the battles; the sudden arrival of Trey and the implications of that; and the final destruction of the marauders. He also told them of the disappearance of Dixon, and how this trip was to force him to show his hand and flush him out into the open.

Kate and the ladies went off by themselves to speak on womanly issues. Kate asked Sarah how she was doing and she radiated her reply with happiness. Kate filled her in on all that had happened in Dragons Bay with the children; she then surprised Sarah with the news about Lady Emily. Lady Sarah stated that that was one birth all would be interested in.

After a good night's sleep, Jackson took the men on a tour of the castle and pointed out the interesting buttresses; each had a large dragon carved into the stone above. He researched this castle and found it had been built on the ruins of another castle thousands of years old. In excavating the surrounding area they had found more carvings in what appeared to be the legs of a large table. He explained he got the feeling that dragon riders had used it before as a base.

He took them to the town below and Daniel was very impressed with all the work they had accomplished in so short a time. The people greeted the riders with good cheer and seem to be a happy lot. Jackson told them that they too had some problems with marauders, but the town folk had given no quarter to them and their like. They were quickly dispatched as soon as they made themselves known. Word spread quickly at how they were dealt with and they soon had no more problems with their like.

Daniel looked about and saw the happy faces of the people, the thriving community, and the 'feeling' of good will that was all about; he relayed all to Jake.
The people are all very contented here Jake, Daniel informed Jake.

Yes Daniel, he relayed, Ichor has done very well indeed.

The party returned to Dragons Hill two weeks later. The trip had been both refreshing and informative. Daniel managed to get a promise from one of the brewery masters at Dragons Mount to come to Dragons Hill to help start up their own brewery in the States. When he promised that the man's name would go down in the Dragon Chronicles as the Brew Meister of the Dragons there was no stopping the men from signing up, they almost began fighting for the honor. In the end, it was Ichor who chose the man best suited for the task, and the honor.

Queenie informed a surprised Daniel that she was carrying seven eggs. Daniel laughed and teased that she and Jake had been very busy indeed. Then he asked if it were safe for her to be flying. She informed him that she was fine for the trip back thru the Thermals. In fact she was elated to be carrying more of Jake's children again.

SERENITY

They arrived in the early morning hours, before the mountain was fully awake. Steve and Lady Ashley, along with Andy and Lady Emily were there to greet them. Their dragons; Daowyn, Lady Elsbeth, and Ash and Lady Ariel were in the air above the plateau. Rah burst thru the Thermals first and spiraled down to the plateau surveying the lay of the land as he descended.

All is clear my liege, Rah called to Jake; it is safe for you to descend.

Thank you Rah, but you and Lady Jennie land first, I wish to fly overhead for a moment. Jake veered off to the right and circled Dragons Hill; Queenie and Daniel followed a short distance away.

Lady Jennie and Lady Mariah landed beside Rah and their riders dismounted and joined Steve and their small group.

What is it Jake? Kate knew him better than anyone and she knew he had something on his mind. Did you pick up on something?

No my lady, I just do not want to put you in harms way. Jake circled once more and then lined up for a landing. You are very dear to me; I want you to know that I will do all I can to keep you safe from this Dixon creature.

Ah, Jake you need not worry... Kate leaned forward and patted Jake's head, I will not give him the chance.

Jake landed with Queenie and Daniel right behind him. After Daniel dismounted, Queenie immediately took off and headed for the hatching grounds. Oreo had awakened early that morning, some inner instinct beckoning her to the cave. She was lying at the entrance waiting as the Queen arched her way around the mountain and lined up on the entrance.

Daniel and Kate greeted Steve and Andrew warmly, after greetings they all went below. Everything looked back to normal as far as Kate and Daniel could tell. Those they met along the path greeted them and welcomed them back home. As they neared the Great Hall, the children bolted for the entrance.

They ran into the Hall and made for the kitchen loudly calling, "Uncle Sam, Uncle Sam!"

Sam was tickled at the sound of their voices and elbowed Johnson in the side as the boys rounded the corner and ran straight into his large arms. Johnson spontaneously laughed along with Sam at the boys' enthusiasm. They were falling over their word as they tried to tell him all about Dragon's Bay, and the beach and the ocean, and swimming with Porpoises, and everything else they did while they were gone.

Sam laughed grabbed each one and threw them into the air as he questioned them about everything. Then he told them that he and Aunt Lucy were planning a trip there with the twins Becky and Collin. Daniel and Kate caught up with them and entered the Hall with the other riders and Kate separated herself and went looking for the boys. She rounded the corner to the kitchens' inner sanctum and called to the boys not to bother Uncle Sam.

Johnson looked up, and for the first time set eyes on Kate close up. She was fresh from several weeks on the beach and in the Alps. Tanned and 'healthy' looking, her fresh beauty momentarily stunned him. He backed up a step and there was an audible intake of breath.

Kate looked up and smiled at him; it was an open and engaging smile. She came forward with her hand outstretched.

"Hi, you must be Johnson, Sam's wizard that everyone is talking about; I'm Kate."

Johnson backed up and stared at her in terror for a moment; then he seemed to pull himself together. His face changed into a warm welcoming grin as he stepped forward, nodded slightly, and took Kate's hand.

"I am honored to meet you at last Lady Kate," he said in a soft voice.

Kate stared at this gentle giant she had heard so much about. There actually seemed to be tears in his eyes as he looked at her, and then quickly lowered his head. Wishing to put him at ease she quickly engaged him in conversation.

"I hope the children didn't upset anything. They're just so excited about their little adventure at Dragons Bay."

"No, no ma'am, they haven't caused any problems; they're just being boys." He smiled at her and seemed to really enjoy her responding smile. He felt an elation unlike anything he had ever felt when she threw her head back and laughed at Sam and the boys.

The boys were giggling and laughing as Sam played with them and questioned them about their adventure in Peru. After a bit Kate called them to order and marched them into the Hall.

"Sam," she said shaking her head, "Sam you're spoiling them. Come on boys, you can visit Uncle Sam later."

Both men watched her as she made her way back to the main dining area.

"She's... she's quite beautiful," said Johnson as he and Sam watched her and the boys. "I, I..." he stammered, "didn't expect that," he added strangely.

"And her heart's just as beautiful," Sam looked up at Johnson explaining, "she saved all of us in the beginning you know."

They watched as Kate joined Daniel and the other riders.

"If she hadn't pushed us into the desert, we would have all been killed for sure."

“You know what we need,” Steve said smiling to the assembled riders at the table, “we need a good old-fashioned party!”

“Yes!” said Lady Ashley exuberantly, “A real knock-down celebration with music and dancing and a Bar-B-Q, and all the works! I’ll bet we could get Joe to donate one of his steers!”

Daniel joined in quickly, “Yes, I suppose we could talk him into it. And we could invite all the surrounding towns and really do it up.” Smiling he looked at Kate questioningly with raised eyebrows, “you know you’d love it Kate!”

“By the way Daniel, before I forget,” Steve began, “I spoke with Lester day before yesterday. He’s very excited to make contact at last and also wants to see Dragons Hill. We could have him come over and join us at the shin-dig.”

“Good idea,” replied Daniel, “There has been enough death and hard times. Now that it is finally over, a little celebration is exactly what is called for.” He looked around the table, “well, let’s start planning!”

“Spring is definitely on its way; in a couple of weeks it will be warm again,” offered Lady Beth. “The valley is already turning green, in a few weeks there will be wild flowers everywhere. We could set up large tents in the valley below the horse pens, where it flattens out.”

“It’s a big enough area that the dragons could attend also,” interjected Lady Ashley, “you know how they love our music. We know of at least seven towns in the immediate area, if we spread the word a lot more will attend. The townspeople would enjoy seeing all the dragons and it would boost their ties to Dragons Hill.”

“Lets make it a Fair,” added Kate quickly, “people could come and display their skills and crafts. Miss Margaret could display her quilts and Lady Susan her knitted shawls and throws.”

“Smart idea,” said Steve smiling at her, “and maybe we will be able to flush out our unwelcome guest.” He looked directly at Daniel. “It’s worth a try?”

Daniel replied, “Agreed, but we will have to keep on our guard and keep Kate in sight at all times. Are you game for this Kate?”

“Need you ask,” she replied with a laugh. “But,” she quickly added, “I would like to keep this just between us. No one else is to know our real plans; not even Sam.”

“Why not Sam, Kate?” asked Daniel uneasy.

“Can’t explain it, just a funny feeling,” she smiled at Daniel, “probably nothing.”

Suddenly Queenie interrupted their conversation calling out to Daniel: *there are seven new eggs in my hatching ground my Daniel, seven new children will need riders so they may join our extended family. You must search and find them.*

***Congratulations Queenie, I am happy for you and Jake. We will begin a search for riders tomorrow.* Daniel promised her immediately.**

All heard a loud bugle from Jake announcing his ‘Approval.’

In Evansville that night, Amy had a dream of flying a light brown dragon. She was soaring across the desert towards Mount Ararat. Beside her was a dark brown giant and riding him, robes flying in the wind, was a black-haired, olive-skinned man she knew from the mists of long ago.

Almost two months later the valley hillside was awash in color. Flowers of every imaginable hue were bursting out along the grassy hillside. Even Texas Bluebonnets and Indian Paintbrushes had managed to make it across the country and bloom amongst the tall green grass. Butterflies and large Bumble Bees could be seen diving in and out among nature's banquet; seemingly not able to get enough of the sweet nectar after so long a drought. Hundreds of hummingbirds could be seen descending into the valley and their curious humming sound actually heard up on the plateau by the curious dragons.

In the center of the valley tents were going up in various sizes. Large groups were beginning to arrive and make camp on the outskirts of Dragons Hill. Many came from long distances having no contact with riders, except for occasional messages brought by them. Many set up displays to show their wares and skills. There was a pottery tent, and a carpentry tent, and a metal tent. Each held booths from the various towns with samples of their wares. Many came and stayed just a day; coming just to see the Dragons up close and perhaps catch a glimpse of Kate or Daniel.

Both Kate and Daniel made it a point to greet each new group as they came in and have a few words with them. Also taking note of this, Jake would fly over the area at least once a day and land in the field. Those who had never seen him were in awe and thrilled to no end. Many hesitantly approached him and expressed gratitude for all he had done for them.

But it was the children of these people the Dragons loved the most. They were not afraid of the large beasts in the slightest, and approached those in the valley with innocent childlike curiosity. Many communicated with them on a telepathic level without realizing it. It was a great time of wonder for all concerned. The Dragons gave rides to these children and questioned them on their towns and the adults in them. Much information was gathered and the Dragons were able to judge the advancement of the people in healing and living conditions.

Many a tale would be told of these encounters between man and dragon, and child and dragon. They would be embellished and retold and passed down from one generation to the next. It would become a yearly gathering when Dragon and man joined together for a brief time.

During this period Johnson wrestled with his conscience; one side of him wanted to be with these people; he felt welcome and wanted and loved. But the other side of him, the dark side, would rise up unbidden and grab his mind and pull it down. Watching from the hillside, man and dragon together, his mind went back. Back to his dragon just before they broke in. Try as he might, when he saw the face of his dragon, madness quickly had its way.

Into this magical gathering Lester and his young son, Jonathan descended. Daniel made contact with Lester weeks before and plans were made for him to join the Gathering, as it would soon be known. Steve timed it so they would arrive just past noon. Lester and his son were still reeling from the excitement of meeting Lady Elsbeth and actually riding her. Her gentle manner with Jonathan made a strong impression on Lester.

Daniel was waiting on the plateau with Jerry when Steve flew over and circled around taking advantage of the large group below. He passed over the valley so Lester could see all the people interacting with the large dragons. Then Lady Elsbeth lined up and made a smooth landing coming to a stop in front of Daniel. Instructed by Steve, both Lester and his son dismounted and went to Lady Elsbeth and thanked her for the wonderful ride. Then Lester turned around, stood there, and stared at Daniel and Jerry.

“My God, you’re both so young looking; just like Steve. I never would have believed it if I wasn’t standing right here.” He came forward and extended his hand to Daniel. Daniel met him half way and they embraced in a bear hug.

“You look good yourself, Les,” he said noting the lines around his face and the silver in his hair. “Welcome to Dragons Hill!”

Daniel knew Lester had gone thru hell in bringing order to the Mountain, and the cost had been a high one; his beloved wife.

“So,” began Jerry, “what do you think of our large companions Les.” Jerry gestured with his arm in a wide arc, “magnificent, aren’t they?”

“Words just don’t cut it guys; they are astounding! Unbelievable!”

Lester was looking about at all the dragons on the plateau and quickly spotted Jake by the entrance to the Riders Hall.

“And I’ll bet that that regal character is the one and only Jake,” he smiled as he stared at him.

Just then Jake turned his head in Lester’s direction and opened his wings in full stretch.

“No fooling you Les,” answered Daniel laughing; “Want to meet him?”

“Oh yes,” answered Les excitedly, “After reading those Dragon Chronicles, you better believe it.”

“Me too!” said Jonathan, Lester’s son, “I want to meet Jake too!”

Daniel looked down at the young boy and laughed. Taking his hand they headed over to Jake. The large dragon spread his wings and stood his full height. Les stopped in his tracks and stared wide-eyed; but it was Jonathan who ran to the dragon without fear and began talking to him telepathically. He was so excited that Jake had to calm him down so his thoughts weren’t so jumbled.

The mighty dragon chuckled at the enthusiasm of the young boy. *Young one, slow down and we will speak of many things. I am very happy to see you also. Yes there are many dragons here, and all will talk to you. Yes, Oreo is here and she will make herself known to you. No, Adam the flying man is in Peru. There is plenty of time for you to meet all; you will be here for several days.*

Daniel came up and introduced Lester to Jake. *I am honored to meet you sir. Please, excuse my son; he is very excited to be here.*

I am happy to greet you at last Lester. Daniel has told me of your earlier association. Jake lowered his head to Lester, but only the good things; he left out all the juicy tidbits!

Lester broke into a laugh and Daniel joined him. *You made a joke!* Lester looked at Daniel and asked, “He makes jokes?”

Yes Les, Jake makes jokes; he’s definitely one of us. Just cause he’s a dragon doesn’t mean he doesn’t have a sense of humor. Daniel informed him.

Wow, this is going to take some getting used to... he smiled at Jake with wide eyes.

Les stood before Jake and they began to exchange information about Thunder Mountain. Jake wanted to know where all the military were located now, and if they were still warlike. He impressed on Les the importance of destroying all the mass weapons that were still available. All the while they were talking Jake was slowly walking towards the Riders Hall.

We must not allow them to be used ever again Les; man must learn a new way. We Dragons abhor the use of such terrible weapons.

I understand Jake, when we took over from the military the first thing I did was gather up the entire set of ‘Destruct Keys’. I didn’t want them available to anyone ever again. Les now realized that he was in the center of the Riders Hall, Master Jeffery was present.

Turning to Daniel, eyes aglow, Jake said: *Why don’t you take Jonathan down to the valley and introduce him to the other children. Lester and I have some information to share.*

Daniel figured what was about to happen and he quickly left with the boy. He guessed that Lester was about to get a crash course in Dragon 101, with a major in Jake 102.

The boy was delighted as they made their way down the mountain. He asked all kind of questions, and as they stepped off the landing, Oreo pranced out of the Great Hall.

“Holy-moly, Uncle Daniel,” he shouted, “Is that Oreo?” Daniel laughed at his outburst.

Jonathan ran to her and went down on one knee and stretched his hand forward towards her. She studied him for a moment and then licked his face and tried to rub up against him purring loudly. She knocked him over, and he giggled and reached up for her.

“You’re beautiful girl, yes you are. I have a cat at home, but Patton’s nothing like you!” He hugged her and continued, “Wow Uncle Daniel, you are so lucky to live here at Dragons Hill.”

Daniel laughed at his innocence and after a bit they continued on down to the valley. He introduced him to Kate and she fawned over him and then led him to the other children. They quickly made friends and went scurrying off to the field where the dragons had landed. They spent the better part of the afternoon playing and talking to the dragons; who seemed enthralled with the precocious boy.

Jake called Daniel back to the top about two hours later to retrieve Lester. He escorted a bedazzled and befuddled Lester down the mountain to the valley. Lester’s appearance, his stance and attitude had changed; Daniel was immediately aware that Lester had gone thru some sort of enhancement.

“Man Daniel, there is so much at stake, so much to do,” Lester said. He stopped and turned to Daniel, “how do you keep it all together?” It was obvious that Les was still in awe of all that had just happened to him, “Jake is... oh man! He’s really something else!”

Daniel laughed and slapped Lester on the back.

“Let’s head down to the large tent in the center of the valley Les. You don’t know it yet, but you are about to have a case of the munchies like nothing you ever experienced.” They stopped at the top of the path and Lester looked below at all the tents set up.

“What you have just been through is called ‘enhancement’, Les. It gives your mind the knowledge you need, and as a bonus - tones up your body. But a side effect is you get ravenous when it is all over; has something to do with the energy you expanded and took in.”

As they walked down the side of the mountain and headed towards the valley, Les took in everything he saw. Passing by the horse pens he stopped to check out the new ponies. Daniel relayed a short version of Lady Victoria, her stallion Samson, the hope to build up the population of horses again. Les was very impressed.

“The Chronicles explained a lot about what happened, Daniel, but I still have to finish the book. And Jeffery says there’s a second one,” Lester exclaimed, “I’ve got a lot to catch up on. And Daniel, that Town Crier you sent had the whole mountain in a frenzy. They couldn’t wait to hear all about the Dragons, and the big battle that took place. They kept that poor young man talking for nearly eight hours straight.”

They headed for the large food tent in the middle of the gathering as Daniel explained the reasoning behind the get together.

Les looked around whistled; “Damn, I’ve never seen so many beautiful people in one place... let me guess, dragon-riders right?”

Daniel threw his head back and laughed, “And the most beautiful is my lovely Kate; the golden-haired beauty over there,” he said pointing.

Daniel introduced Lester to Kate and the other riders. They all joined together at lunch and there was much conversation about the 'before' times. Lester had them all laughing, especially Kate, at his imitation of the Daniel he knew before the 'Burning'. There were a multitude of questions about the people in the Mountain. And all heard the sadness in Lester's voice as he explained the final days of the military and the peoples' rebellion; and the consequences of that.

After a while Lester inquired about his son, Jonathan. Kate told him he and the other children were playing in the field by the dragons. Curious, Lester and Daniel went to the ridge overlooking the field.

"Would you look at them, Daniel," Lester was amazed at his son and the other children playing right by the large dragons. "He has no fear of the dragons at all," Lester grinned, "And I'd bet he's talking to them, I'm sure."

"The dragons have a special love for children, Les, and the children seem to pick up on it." Daniel put his hand on Lester's shoulder. "Don't be worried Les, they would never hurt a child. They find them delightful and a joy to be with."

"Yeah, I know," said Lester softly.
Daniel turned to his friend with questioning eyes.

"Daniel, I haven't been entirely truthful about something," Les looked down at his hands for a moment.

"What is it Les," Daniel asked, intrigued.
Let him tell you in his own way Daniel, came Jake's strong voice.

"It's Jonathan; I know I shouldn't worry, not after talking with Jake. But he's only a little boy; and to be honest, I don't think I'm ready to lose him yet."
He looked at Daniel and continued, "You see he started drawing pictures of the dragons about a year ago. Just little kid pictures, you know, stick figures and all. But then I noticed that the drawings started to get better and better each time. They took on form and shape and color. About a month ago he drew a picture of Jake and informed me we were going to see him soon."

Les walked a few paces ahead and turned to face Daniel. "Then he drew a picture of several large dragon eggs. And he pointed to one and said it was his 'friend'. The next drawing was one of his 'friend' just after hatching. I know now what that means Daniel; he's going to be rider isn't he?" Lester asked.

"Yes Les, it would seem he is; Queenie just laid a small cluster of eggs. Les, it's okay."

They made their way down to the children, and when Jonathan saw his father and Daniel approaching, he ran to him.

"Dad, Uncle Daniel!" His face was aglow with excitement; breathlessly he exclaimed, "Oh Daddy, aren't they wonderful?"

Les hugged his son and listened as he continued rambling on and on.

“Oh to see them fly, and talk to them all time, to hear all the little ones calling out. Oh just to be with them! You are so lucky Uncle Daniel!”

“Easy young man, calm down. They are going to be a part of your life too.”
Lester patted his son on the head, “You will be seeing a lot of them in the future.”

Daniel got down on one knee and putting his hand on the boy’s waist he asked, “What do you mean by hearing the little ones call out?”

Jonathan smiled, “the little dragons, Uncle Daniel! Can’t you hear them? They stir and call out to their riders. One even called my name!” He looked from his father to Daniel, “When can I go to him Uncle Daniel, huh?”

Daniel stood and looked at Lester running his hand over his forehead and thru his hair; “Well now, it appears you’re right Les.”
Jake? Have you been keeping pace with all this?

Yes Daniel, it seems we have a new rider.
A loud roar of ‘Approval’ could be heard echoing down from the mountaintop.

See, said an excited Jonathan with his mind, even Jake approves!

Slow down Jonathan, you are scaring your father, Daniel cautioned gently, he does not have your gift of telepathy. He cannot hear the dragons as you do.

Oh, I didn’t know Uncle Daniel, replied Jonathan in a sad voice.

“Oh Daddy,” he said turning to Les with tears in his eyes, “I’m so sorry, I thought you could hear them too!”

“It’s alright son, it’s your gift, never apologize for it,” Les replied hugging his son.

Feeling a bit claustrophobic, Kate left the cafeteria tent and headed up towards the mountain. There were just too many people crowding about to suit her; she needed to get away for some fresh air. She was in a light mood, happy to see so many arriving with smiles on their faces and hope in their hearts. It was a marked improvement to be sure, hardly any dour faces. And according to Master Jeffery, there was a remarkable amount of new babies. That meant the people felt there was a future, and so new life was needed to fill it.

She went up the side of the mountain, cut thru her apartment rooms and went above to share some time with Jake. She was anxious to see if Jake picked up on the changes in the peoples' attitudes. She climbed the steps that brought her out onto the plateau. As she emerged she suddenly felt an iron grip about her throat; she couldn't breath, malevolent words hissed in her ear.

“Do not make a sound or a move. And lady, don't warn Jake with your mind or your son will die!”

He swung her around roughly and she saw Billy lying on his side, tied up, gagged and blindfolded. She lurched forward but got nowhere as he swung her around again. He had a tight hold and pressed himself to her ear as he hissed again.

“We're going to take a little stroll bitch, and you are going to behave. If you attempt to warn him I will know it, and I will kill you, then your son, understand?”

Kate nodded, all the while her mind was racing for a plan, but she saw no way out of this situation, for now. Then she thought of Trey and Mariah and she sent a quick plea for help. She would do as he said, (whoever he was), and bide time for a move later. He pushed her forward slowly; searching the plateau with each step they took. As she rounded the large boulder Jake came into view at the far end of the plateau.

“Ha, good,” the man snarled strangely, “he's alone, good.” He herded Kate forward; the blade in her back increased its pressure. He lined himself up so he was behind her and cutoff from Jake's view.

My Lady is that you? Jake called out – no answer.

Jake turned his body towards her. *You seem distressed, is something wrong?*

Jake called to her, but she didn't answer.

A moment later, *Kate... is it Dixon?*

Kate pictured the great falcons in her mind and sent them aloft in a sudden flutter hoping Jake would get the idea... danger.

Down below Mariah suddenly called to Trey in alarm, *He has her!*

Feeling something was very wrong Daniel rushed out of the tent just in time to see Trey running towards an agitated Mariah.

“Trey, what is it, what’s happened?”

“He’s got Kate, Daniel, they’re on the plateau!”

“God no!” Daniel turned pale and began to run towards the mountain.

Joe spied him running thru the crowd of people, pushing himself along with fear in his eyes. Surmising his alarm he called to Steve and pointed to Daniel. Steve guessed it had to be Dixon making his move and soon all three men were running towards the mountain.

Jake warned Mariah to stay away; he also warned the men to stay away, knowing it wouldn’t stop them. Daniel said he knew another way up to the plateau and headed towards Queenie’s hatching grounds.

High above the plateau Trey began to concentrate deeply, very deeply.

Dixon half dragged Kate out into the open, but kept her far enough out of fire range of the large dragon.

Jake turned and faced him and lowered his head; *well now, we meet at last. You did a very good job of hiding Dixon. I don’t think any suspected you.*

Dixon’s eyes were wild now; Jake could see he was lost in the throes of the madness. *Why didn’t you protect her, he raged, you were supposed to protect her? She spoke so often of you, your goodness and wisdom. Why didn’t you come and save her, he demanded. Do you know what they did to her?*

His voice took on a strange tone now.

They ripped her to shreds! He shrieked... Do you know how she suffered?

Yes Dixon I know, and I know how you have suffered too; I know your feeling of loss.

Jake could see the madness in his eyes.

I also know that she would not have approved of this behavior, she would have expected more of you.

Don’t you speak of her! He screamed at Jake.

You know nothing... his voice suddenly softened ... she was so beautiful.

Dixon twitched once and momentarily eased his hold on Kate.

She was so graceful; her voice was like silk as she spoke to me with love.

He remembered again, *and she accepted me just the way I was.*

He smiled crazily; he could almost hear her voice, flashes of her came unbidden into his mind

Do not do this my friend...Jake calmly urged.

Dixon jumped... “Nooo,” He screamed looking about, expecting to see her..

Suddenly his face hardened again.

You’re going to know what it’s like!

He snickered, an evil sound.

You’re going to feel that kind of loss; and I’m going to stand here and watch you go mad.

He threw his head back and laughed manically.

Your own dragons will be forced to kill you... Ha! Yes, yes!

Kate twisted and turned, finally getting a look at him. *Johnson!*

“No!” she said in disbelief, stunned at the deception.

“Not you... you’re part of our family! Sam trusted you... so many liked you. The children, the children loved you. No!”

“Believe it bitch,” he spat out and reached for her, “I’m very, very good at what I do!”

Fear for her son and what this crazed man was capable of doing to him suddenly filled Kate with anger. She shifted her feet and kicked out, catching Dixon/Johnson off guard. He went down hard but was back up in a matter of seconds. During these brief seconds Kate turned to run; but she wasn’t fast enough. Dixon lashed out with his fist and caught her in the middle of the back, sending her spinning. The air was knocked out of her, as she was slammed against a boulder, unable to move or catch her breath.

Everything stood still for an eternity as if time stopped.

Dixon raised his hand in slow motion; Kate saw the glint of the blade he held in it.

No! Kate thought in a rage; not like this!

Daniel, Joe and Steve came onto the plateau just in time to witness Dixon/Johnson’s verbal assault on Jake. They heard everything and realized they were dealing with a madman. Hidden behind a large boulder, Daniel leaned out for a second and met Kate’s eyes. A slight shift of her head in one direction and Daniel saw his son in the distance tied up and lying beside a boulder.

No!

And then he saw a patch of black and white closing on the boy, just out of sight of Dixon.

Oreo!

Daniel exhaled a sigh of relief; he could now concentrate on getting Kate away from the demented man.

Pressed against the boulder with him, Joe’s mind was racing. He was racking his brains looking for some kind of plan to use against the man. He had been in similar situations in the long past... *there has to be something I can use! Think, man, think!*

Joe raised his eyes as if looking to the heavens for help when he suddenly saw a familiar face. He elbowed Daniel and Steve and pointed upward. The cougar that he had saved so many years earlier was crouched above, focused intently on the man, waiting for a chance to leap.

Trey’s concentrated thoughts finally had its desired effect. For a brief few seconds Dixon was confused.

Seeing his dilemma, Kate kicked out with every ounce of her strength catching Dixon by surprise. (He thought her finished, unable to move.) The force threw her back and she slid down the side of the boulder and rolled away from him.

Dixon backed up a step and now saw beyond her; Oreo had grabbed the nape of Billy's jacket and was pulling him to safety. Surprised, Dixon uttered a loud guttural roar. "Nooo... arrgh...!"

The golden cougar answered it as she leapt towards the startled man. There was a split-second of recognition on Dixon's face before the cougar sunk her fangs into his neck. Both went down and rolled and fought for a brief moment of eternity.

Dixon was stabbing his blade into the cat's side repeatedly and her claws were ripping thru his chest to his rib cage. In all this she had not given up her hold on his neck. They fought and rolled across the plateau, Dixon screaming gurgling obscenities, the cat never letting go of her hold on him.

Jake and the others watched the battle with bated breath.

Then as suddenly as it started, it ended when both rolled over the edge of the cliff and dropped to their deaths 200 feet below.

Moments later the valley echoed the death chant as the dragons honored the sacrifice of the cougar.

It was finally over.

All of them stood there transfixed; stunned at the turn of events. Then Daniel regained his senses and ran to Kate, helping her to her feet. Both parents then ran to Oreo and their son. There was a lot of hugging and kissing. Daniel hugged the large cat and thanked her for saving their son.

It was then that Daniel heard Queenie, *Daniel my companion, you don't think I would allow one of my children to be hurt do you? I sent Oreo the minute I picked up on your distress.*

Thank you Queenie; my love and thanks, expressed Daniel humbly.

Joe and Steve went over to the cliff edge and looked down.

"Oh Goldie, baby you shouldn't have..." murmured Joe.

Jake came to his side.

Joe, she came to me and demanded the right to remove the man. It is rare indeed that they ask for anything. She said the man had hurt your mate, and was a continuing threat to all. She said it was time for peace again; the man had to be removed. According to their code, her debt to you is paid.

Oh Jake... Joe hung his head and leaned against Jake; *she was always so headstrong.* Steve put his hand on his shoulder.

“Joe,” said Daniel coming to his side, “I’m sorry for your loss, truly, but I’m also very grateful. Your friend saved Kate and Billy’s life.”

Joe nodded in understanding as he looked up at Jake.

Jake, there were tears in Joe’s eyes now; I would like to take her home. Bury her under the large oak out back. Joe smiled; she always liked to hang out under or on that big old tree.

Daowyn has already offered his services, Joe, Jake informed him; He will take her home for you.

***Thank you Jake,* replied Joe as he turned and started to make his way down when he realized there was no way down.**

Jake, can Daowyn give me a ride down to her; it should be me who picks her up.

***I will be honored to do this,* answered Daowyn landing on the plateau.**

“Let me help you Joe,” Steve offered.

“No Steve,” Joe quickly answered, “this is something I must do alone. Thanks for offering anyways.” Joe climbed up on Daowyn and they were swiftly in the air and headed below.

A truly selfless act,* mused Jake watching them go below, *her cubs have a lot to live up to. Turning to Kate and Daniel he asked, are you all right Lady Kate; did that monster traumatize young Billy?

Jake, I’m just fine,* Kate smiled up at the large dragon, *and Billy is fine too. He comes from strong stock you know.

***Of course he does my Lady, of course he does.* Jake threw back his head and roared loudly.**

Six months later as the sun rose over a snow-covered land, Joe held his newborn son in his hands and cried. He marveled that something so small could evoke such strong emotions. A loud roar of 'Approval' came from the field beyond the house where Daowyn and Lady Elsbeth had spent the night easing Lady Victoria's birth pains. Kissing Victoria and telling her he loved her more than he could possibly tell her; Joe wrapped his young son warmly and ran to the field and presented him to Daowyn. The large green dragon breathed on the baby and congratulated Joe on a strong son. Then Joe brought his son to Lady Elsbeth and offered her a look also.

Millie yelling out the back door brought Joe back to his senses and he ran for the house with both dragons chuckling behind him. Following him all along were Goldie's cubs, both already the size of a large dog.

On the other side of the world Jake was in Austria keeping company with Ichor as Lady Sarah went into labor. The dragons of Ichor's clan keened loudly for Lady Sarah and after eight hours of hard labor, she delivered twin boys. On urging from Sarah, Jackson brought both boys out to Ichor and presented them. The mighty dragon blew over the boys and breathed in commenting that they were strong of spirit, and would be wise leaders. He then threw back his head and roared 'Approval', which thundered down thru the valley, announcing the arrival of the babies to all.

And across the ocean, along the coast of Peru, a miracle was taking place. Lady Emily was in labor, and a very worried Adam was beside himself; flying from the plateau to the clinic and back to the plateau. Valotin tried to reassure him, but Adam knew Lady Emily was delivering at least six weeks early; and to be honest after all... this was a special case. Nigel and the Shaman attended her, and Valotin's dragons keened to ease her pain. Many long hours later they emerged from the clinic smiling. The birds around the clinic rose in exultation signaling Adam to the arrival of his children. Adam rushed to the clinic and found his Emily holding two small bundles in her arms; one was blue and one was pink. Taking the baby boy from Emily, Lady Elizabeth laid the baby down and opened the blue blanket and gently turned the baby over. Adam saw the unmistakable signs of tiny wings beginning where the shoulder blades were located on his son. There would be another flyer in the family. Adam held his young son in his arms and cried tears of joy. Then he wrapped him up again, and taking his daughter from Emily, he flew to Valotin where he proudly presented them.

The entire jungle came alive as Valotin's roar of 'Approval' was heard to the very heights of Machu Picchu.

Greeting the morning sun Jake bowed his head humbly and gave his report.
Peace had returned to the world.
New sets of rules had been established, and were followed willingly by all.
There was no more jealousy and greed; no hoarding of the essentials - each man survived because of his brother; and all were happier for it.

How long this would last was anybody's guess.
But Jake was betting on man.
After all, were they not given the keys to the kingdom?
All he had to do was teach them how to use them.

Yes, things were coming along quite nicely.