

JAKE

**BOOK ONE OF
THE FIRST YEARS**

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PROLOGUE

Dr Wilson Talbot, professor of Archeology at Utah State, was working late into the night locked in his laboratory trying to identify a sample of bone and skin fragment sent to him by a colleague. The carbon dating said it was between seven to ten thousand years old; but the shape and texture, along with the photos of the area, suggested that it had to be older.

The results of the skin test came back, only to baffle him more; it was leather-like, almost reptilian. Dr Talbot became very excited; could it be possible his pet theory, (one that his contemporaries scoffed at), was right after all? He believed that pterodactyls lived a lot longer than anyone thought; that they resided right here in the U.S. western states. More important, he believed that they were probably around up until about six thousand years ago. His colleagues disagreed with him. They thought he was being misled, that perhaps he was letting himself get carried away. Talbot recognized that this might be his only chance to prove them all wrong. In his long career he had never had the opportunity to name a new species. If this panned out he would be famous, not at all an unpleasant thought for the professor.

Talbot closed his eyes and mused to himself; Perhaps this is a subspecies of the same family. It would prove that they did exist on the northern continent; hmm... the only problem is the dating. Was it possible that he was right; that they did live long after the dinosaurs, trapped on this continent? Or quite possibly, that this just may be a whole new creature! Damn it all, I can't tell anything from here, I have to go the site and see for myself.

Getting the necessary permits and permission to work on a military base, where the site was located, wasn't too much trouble. The professor simply called in some favors from his friends. It was a small out of the way base, used to mothball old and out of date jets. Nobody would object to his exploration of the dig site.

One week later Professor Talbot and his team, with permits in hand, arrived at Camp Bradley in northern Nevada. They were greeted with pomp and courtesy. Not much went on in the out of the way base and the diversion was welcomed with gusto. Not a word of protest was made at all the equipment the professor brought with him. The soldiers on the base were only too happy to help; any relief from the boredom they all felt was welcomed; many volunteered to help at the dig site. The professor was delighted; he wanted to get down to the site first thing.

Four days later the professor and his team lowered themselves into a large cavern they stumbled onto under their main dig site. Flares illuminated the area and they could see that the cavern was more like an antechamber; there was a larger opening leading to yet another cavern beyond. There was great excitement among the students and dig captains as they all descended and then entered the main chamber together.

The world was about to change.

Nine days later at Alamogordo, NM, testing grounds, Major Daniel Sherman (Special Ops Division), was called to the base commander's office. He was told that they couldn't seem to raise Camp Bradley in Northeastern Nevada. All contact with the base was lost. There were several flyovers but cloud cover was obstructing the view of the ground below. He was told to check it out and to report back.

As he left the building, he was already making a mental note on the men he would take; they would be from his Hawk Strike Team. Sgt Steve Bowman, demolitions expert; he could blow pollen off the wings of a butterfly and not disturb the delicate creature. He was levelheaded under fire and more important – he loved his work. Next would be Sgt Jerry Lakers, best point man and engineer in the Army. The man could build anything out of whatever materials were available. Then of course he would insist on Lt. Billy Wilson, S/OPS sniper, a crack-shot. He would want their butts covered since they were going in blind. He would need an expert com-man and that would be Sgt. Lester Wilde; strange guy, but he was good. He had a homemade rig he made for himself when he was in the field. He took a lot of jokes about it, but he could hear a snake crawl out of its hole forty feet away. It had saved their lives more than once on past missions. Daniel put in the necessary calls and they all met in the hanger at the south end of the base. They left within the hour with Dan flying the chopper. Once away from the base, they dropped all pretense of military rank.

“What’s the real scoop Dan?” Steve asked. He and Dan were best friends, they had served 16 years together; and Steve knew that there was more to this than they were saying.

“You’re right Steve, okay guys listen up,” Daniel began, “something, and I stress ‘something’, attacked the base. There was one short message; ‘Oh my God – they’re everywhere...!’ It was the last message that got thru before they lost all contact. This is a small base, nothing there but a few empty missile silos, and a mothball storage facility for jets. Lester, when we get close, put on your ears and let me know about anything you hear, we’re going in totally blind on this one gentleman.”

After an hour and a half in the air they dropped down to just above ground. They flew for another half hour and then landed in a clearing on the eastern side of a mountain ridge. They were about a mile and a half down wind from the base.

They set off at a fast pace and were making good time when suddenly Lester flinched, “son of a bitch,” he hissed as he tore off his headgear. His face drained of all color as he looked up at Daniel strangely then picked up the headphones and listened again. Shaking his head he said, “There’s something out there Dan; it sounded like... like a roar or,” shaking his head back and forth, “...a screech maybe? It wasn’t a machine sound it was more like a living thing.”

As they rounded the edge of a rocky incline, they began to smell it. Something was burning, the scent was familiar; they just couldn’t put their finger on it, at first. Then Jerry stumbled and fell; he leapt to his feet, visibly shaken when he realized what he had fallen over. It was a human body; burnt to a crisp and twisted into a grotesque shape. They saw in the distance fires burning everywhere. As they entered the base, there were more bodies lying about, all like the first one. The further they went into the base, the more bodies they found. There was thick black smoke hanging over the entire base. Nothing moved on the ground except for the flames dancing about the buildings.

They were under an overhang awning on the backside of a building when they all heard it for the first time. Lester gave the hand signal for freeze and then pressed his back against the building. “Something’s coming this way,” he hissed.

No one moved for five agonizing minutes, and then they all heard the sound. It was a loud, deep whisper like.... ‘Whoosh-whip-whip-whoosh’.

It was coming from right above them; all heads turned slowly upward. Passing over them, highlighted by the fires below, was what could only be termed as... a dragon.

An honest-to-God flying dragon, huge wings extended as it soared over the base. And to further emphasize the unreality of the situation, the damn thing shot out a long flame and fired a hanger on the other side of the airfield. They all stared at each other as if to confirm what they saw.

“That’s what I heard on the phones. God Almighty, what the hell is going on here?” Lester put into words what they were all thinking. “Wait a minute; I hear something... voices behind us... about 15 feet behind us,” he was intently listening on his headphone set. “There are muffled sounds, definitely human; I think they’re underground, in a bunker.”

Daniel checked the area. After the damn thing made another pass they could make a run for it; billowing black smoke would provide them cover. But first, he had to find the hidden bunker. Jerry and Steve were searching the area with their field glasses.

Suddenly Steve called to him, “I found it! It’s over there,” he pointed to a row of dumpsters, “come on follow me; move it girls!”

They ran like the devil was chasing them, (and it was). Steve reached down and grabbed a large ring that none of them had seen. He gave it a yank and a large metal slab lifted to reveal steps leading down. The four men rushed down the steps, Burst into the room and closed the ‘door’ just in time; the dragon was coming around again.

Daniel scanned the bunker quickly; there were 10 people inside: two sergeants, and 3 privates; the OD (Officer of the Day), 2 burned soldiers, a lieutenant, and a female civilian worker. They were all pretty well shaken up.

“Are you part of a rescue force?” The Staff Sergeant nervously asked.

“Please get us out of here,” demanded a very shaky female civilian.

“We’re recon; what the hell happened here?” Daniel used his best ‘get-your-shit-together’ voice more to get them under control than to sound like a dick officer.

“I can tell you sir,” it was the OD who stepped forward, a young first lieutenant. He looked very frightened, and his voice quivered as he began.

“About two weeks ago a group of archaeologists showed up; they had all these permits that allowed them to dig out by the runway. Said they had found some strange bones out there and they wanted to see if they could be identified. They set up a big dig site, and they used some of our guys to help. Everything was going fine, until they struck some kind of opening in the ground. Said there was a massive underground cavern and they were going to explore it.”

The OD took a long breath and continued. “That was the last we heard from them. The next thing we knew we were being fired upon; literally sir, they were everywhere, burning everything. We couldn’t even get a message out; it was that fast. No matter what we fired at them, they just kept coming.”

The kid was shaking and rapidly losing it. “No one is going to believe this, sir. I mean... they’re dragons for Gods sake; who’s going to believe that?”

“Get a hold of yourself lieutenant!” Daniel shouted and then started firing questions at him. “Are there any others alive? Does this bunker connect to any others? Where is the commander’s office located?” Daniel figured if he kept him busy answering questions, he would pull it together. The last thing he needed was a bunch of panicked people.

The young man took a deep breath and seemed to steel himself; “I believe this connects with the bunker under the commanders building, sir.”

He looked around, "But we haven't seen him in two days, I don't know who's alive and who's dead. We did real good just to make it here. They have excellent eyesight sir; nothing gets by them. And sir, it seems that more keep coming out of the cavern opening. By my count, I think there are 20 to 30 of them; but they're so fast that I'm not real sure."

"Sgt. Wilde," Daniel said turning to Lester, "can we get out of here and back to the chopper?" Daniel knew they had to get word back as fast as possible.

"Sir, I'm not sure that would be wise right now. Maybe when the sun rises and the glare buys us a few minutes. But we'll have to make it really, really quick!" Les emphasized his last words for effect.

Daniel had a sinking sensation in his gut. "Ok, first, lets see if we can find any others alive in the bunkers. Second, try to get word to the outside; third, find a way to get the hell out of here. Steve, you and Jerry take care of number one. Les, is there any way to rig up a link and let the outside know what is happening here?"

"Sir, I could try to link with the satellite when she comes over. I might be able to get a short message out. But I'll need some help." He was looking at the two sergeants.

Daniel picked up on his intent and turned to the two terrified men, "you two give him a hand. Come on gentlemen, move it!" he ordered them.

Two hours later produced little, they could find no one else alive. Les managed to get a short message out. Whether anyone picked it up was the magic question, which was answered about 30 minutes later when 3 Phantom jets did a fly by. The dragons immediately set upon them. Daniel could only imagine what the pilots were facing up there. While the dragons were occupied with the jets, Daniel urged everyone out of the bunker and they made a dash for the chopper. As they made their getaway Daniel saw only one jet make it away. Once back at home base Daniel reported directly to the General and at first he was not taken seriously.

"Dragons? My God man, this is insane! An entire base knocked out, just 10 people left alive; and all this by dragons?" He looked at Daniel as if he were mad, "This is bullshit, Major!"

The arrival of the photos and video from the jet confirmed all that Daniel had related. The General paled as he watched the video. "Son of a bitch...!" He decided that since Daniel had seen them in action, he would send him to Washington with the video and photos as backup.

At the Pentagon Daniel played the videos and there was stunned silence in the conference room afterwards. Then a Four Star General informed them that there were four cities that had been totally destroyed since the monsters had left the area. Each town had approximately 6 to 10 thousand inhabitants. A fly over was done and there was nothing left but ash and burning buildings. A Colonel came in and spoke to the General. A video of the fly-by was shown as the jets flew at supersonic speed over the affected areas. There were over 100 of these creatures and they were headed west; at this rate they would fly straight into Reno.

"Reno, Nevada is lit up 24/7, gentlemen; I doubt they will pass up a fat target like that; it's too tempting a morsel for these monsters. How do we warn 3 to 4 million people that 100/plus fire-breathing dragons are headed their way? They are not going to believe us." He looked about the room as if deciding on something.

“Gentlemen, we’re going to release all the video footage and photos to the press. I want it all over TV. Every morning show is to get all the information we have; Good Morning America, Today Show, CNN, Fox News; all the channels. We have to warn people, and the best way is to inundate the media with everything we got. Let them dissect it and come up with answers.” He then turned to Daniel, “Major Sherman, you saw them in action, what are they like?”

Daniel answered quickly; “Fast sir, incredibly fast. Their fire is so hot it melted the fuselage of two of the Phantom jets; the third one barely made it away. Bullets don’t penetrate their hides; nothing seems to affect them. If we don’t find a way to neutralize them, they could destroy us.”

There was a knock at the door; a sergeant came in with a message. “Good news sir, they seem to have disappeared. None have been sighted anywhere, radar shows nothing. Our scouts can’t pick them up anywhere in a hundred mile area.”

“Sir, I don’t think that they’re gone,” Daniel was just guessing, but he felt it wasn’t over. “I think they just went to ground for some reason. Sergeant, are there any large caves in the area?”

The General thought for a moment, then spoke, “Major, I want you and your team to go to Thunder Mountain in Colorado. Take whomever you want or think you will need and get there as soon as possible. I want you to set up a task force to deal with these things. You can have anything you think you need; try to come up with something we can use to destroy these beasts.” The General was adamant about destroying them.

“Yes sir, I’ll leave immediately. I’d like a list of paleontologists, and archeologists who are knowledgeable in this area to be waiting for me when I arrive. I may need their help to combat these creatures.” He saluted and left quickly. As he left the room he saw the General pick up the red phone. The President was being informed of the seriousness of the situation.

Days later Daniel had his team inside the mountain. Lester had setup a media center that he was monitoring for any unusual activity. Most of the scientists were doubtful of the claims until they saw the videos. They watched the videos intently and then talked among themselves. They were fascinated by the beasts, and amazed at the size of these creatures. They were admittedly dumbfounded as to how to destroy them. They all agreed on one thing, they needed a specimen to study.

That afternoon Lester came into the room and went to the map on the wall and stuck a large black pin in it.

“Sir, there’s a report of an airliner down in this general area. Air traffic control said one minute it was there, then the next there were five different blips on the screen, and then the airliner was gone. These blips moved so fast they couldn’t track them. I think our little beasties are at it again.”

Daniel asked for a volunteer to do a fly by. Maybe if they were high enough, they would make it back. It was hours before they heard anything. The pilot nervously told them that he managed to shoot down one of them, but he barely made it back to base. He explained that when one of them opened its mouth to flame him, he shot a missile at it, and the resulting explosion brought it down. The video was being processed and they anxiously awaited its results. When it finally arrived it showed them what they wanted to know. There were at least 150 of them now. They were coming out of a large cavern in the desert. They appeared to be a ragtag lot; even so they were still a very formidable enemy. The video from the jet also showed where the felled dragon was located; about a half mile from a cavern opening. If they could get that carcass back to the scientists, maybe they could tell them something.

Daniel decided that they would wait till the dragons moved on. They calculated their direction and warned all the towns in their flight path that they were coming. When they were sure the dragons had left the area, Daniel took his team and headed for the cavern. Everyone was jumpy; this was a very dangerous thing they were doing, but they had to know their new enemy.

Inside the cavern, they found a lot of broken eggs of varying sizes. They also found smaller eggs with baby dragons still in them, and some of these seemed to have been deliberately destroyed. That was when Lester said that he could 'hear' a small child calling to him. They searched the cavern, but they couldn't find any sign of a child. Lester insisted and kept searching but to no avail. In a fit he destroyed several of the gelatinous eggs.

They brought in a large cargo chopper and hoisted up the carcass of the dragon and quickly headed back to the base. The scientists were damn near salivating when they returned; they couldn't wait to get their hands on the damn thing. The sheer size of the beast was mind-blowing. They quickly went to work with all their specialized equipment. Several hours later, the results of the scientist's semi-autopsy and blood tests were less than expected. The hide had an asbestos-like quality to it, perfect protection; it was impossible to penetrate with any type of bullet or knife. For some reason, metal wouldn't penetrate the hide. The scientists had nothing else to work with against these monsters. After the initial report, they sat about for a bit throwing ideas out as to what they were and where they could have come from.

A timid private explained that he had heard stories from his great grandmother. She had received them from her grandmother and so on. Dragons were a dark blight on the land and could only be killed one way; they had to be taken down by a large wooden stake. After a little debate on the subject the private, along with Sgt. Bowman and Sgt Lakers excused themselves from the group. They took a broom from the maintenance closet, broke off the handle and Jerry took out his machete and whittled it to a sharp point. Sgt Bowman and the private fashioned a crude crossbow, large enough to hold the stake. They placed the 'stake' on it and fired it at the beasts under belly. They managed to do what all their weaponry and jets could not... they penetrated the hide. The scientists all looked at each other and the young men incredulously.

Weeks went by, and the reports were piling up; no one was safe outside anymore. A small prison on the outskirts of the desert was attacked; these poor bastards never had a chance. The dragons picked it clean, and then moved on to the nearby town. The survivors there had horror stories to tell.

In the end, the military men in charge put more stock in their weapons than in science. They even tried to nuke them. It did no good, the dragons simply moved on to a different area. They kept multiplying at an astonishing rate. All contact was lost with Washington, D.C. and the entire east coast. And then word came that it had spread to Europe. Highflying jets were used to send and receive messages between the two continents, but after several months even this was futile against the beasts. All word was lost from overseas. We were all on our own, to face whatever future the fates had in store for us.

After about 2500 civilians showed up and asked for shelter, Thunder Mountain was locked up tighter than a drum. The civilians were allowed to stay, but strict rules were enforced. No one else ever made it up the mountain. The military ran things inside the mountain as if nothing was going on outside. Strict military discipline was followed. A year went by, and the dragons seemed to have settled out on the west coast.

It was around this time that the dreams started for Daniel and his men; strange dreams that urged them to see what was happening; urged them to flee to the West. At first Daniel tried to ignore them, but they proved to be persistent. Daniel soon found that some of the dreams were precognitive. They didn't discuss the dreams with each other; it would be much later that they would compare notes about them. They didn't remember much of the dreams at first; then, little by little Daniel started to remember portions of his. He began to see and remember a woman in his dreams; he knew her, felt comfortable with her, very comfortable. She was urging him on. Each time he awoke, he remembered more.

Seeing the handwriting on the wall, Daniel felt an increased urgency to leave the Mountain. He began to think that they should listen to the dreams and leave. He finally broke down and spoke to his men about it; to his surprise he found that they too had been having dreams. They wanted out also, and quickly. Some secret discussions late in the evening and they came up with a plan that would sound good to the higher ups. Daniel convinced the base commander that an elite team would be able to scout the surrounding area and report back what the conditions were like outside, information that was sorely needed. He had them all agreeing before he was finished, and they gave him a resounding 'Go'.

Daniel and his men prepared carefully for the mission. They were given all the ammo they could carry, a six months supply of food, and radio equipment. Steve took all the C4 he could carry. The only drawback came from Lester; he didn't want to go. He had met a sweet little girl, and he wanted to stay with her. He promised that he wouldn't give them away. So it was just the four of them. The huge doors to the mountain were opened at dawn, and they took their leave. Daniel and his men slowly made their way out of the area and never looked back.

They were careful to travel by day, and hide at night. Several times they saw a dragon pass by way up high, but they never ran into any of them in great numbers. At first they didn't find any towns or cities inhabited. Then little by little they started to run across small out of the way towns that were still operating. They would be met at the barricaded gates of these towns and politely asked not to stay. They ran into many bands of marauders across the country. They fought many, and ran from many more.

A year on the road and the dreams began to take on a new tone; they gave them a direction and urged them to hurry. They were being urged to head west-northwest. After speaking of how everything had changed, they decided that perhaps they should follow the dreams and their instructions.

The woman in Daniel's dreams had now taken on form and character. He knew her face as one knows an old friend. At times the dreams were so real that he would wake up and still smell her scent. She was a constant, always there, enticing, urging him onward. He began to look forward to the dreams with anticipation.

Six months later they were instructed to head west quickly. By now they knew to listen to the dreams, so they moved cautiously but quickly. They began to realize that they were alone now. There were no towns, no people, just desert. Two months later they saw the mountains in the distance. They recognized the shape and color immediately.

Steve yelled, "Look, out there, it's them! You know it Daniel; it's the mountains from the dreams!"

With racing hearts they quickened their pace.

NEW WORLD

About five years ago, Hell paid a visit to the planet Earth. I remember hearing about it first on television, like everyone else. The ‘experts’ had all kinds of theories and explanations, but nothing concrete. Then people started disappearing; on they’re way to work, running at the track; going to the store. Pretty soon, people were afraid to leave their homes. The fires came next; no matter where you went, something was burning. It was happening everywhere, all over the world.

And then they came.

There was nowhere to hide, there was so much fear, before too long panic set in. They seemed to be everywhere, they... ha...why don’t we call them what they are: dragons... oh yea - right out of a sci-fi novel... fucking fire-breathing dragons!

I lost my family, except for Michael. I try not to remember that part too much; it tends to make me a little crazy. My clearest memory of that time is taking Michael away from the fire, and running. I can remember seeing the Houston skyline ablaze in my rear view mirror as I headed south on I-45 towards Galveston. Great patches of black smoke spiraled towards the sky and covered the horizon from one end to the other. I thought we would be safe near the ocean; they seemed to avoid large areas of water. Getting food wasn’t a problem, we hit stores for that, and we were careful to conserve. K-Marts, Academy’s and such supplied us with all the camping gear and weapons we needed. I found a real nice crossbow at one of these and kept it with me all the time. We were exceedingly careful as we traveled along the coast towards Beaumont. Before too long we spotted roving bands of marauders; these men were butchers and very deadly. Man never changes, take away his cities, his society, and he reverts to the caveman mentality pretty damn quick. We steered clear of these groups and turned inland. Every now and then we would find a farmhouse that was untouched; we would stay a day or two and rest up at these places.

Michael was in a state of shock for several months; seeing your family disintegrated in a ball of fire is pretty traumatic for a 9 year old. I did what I could for him, which wasn’t much; I was worried he wouldn’t snap out of it. We ran, we hid, we screamed, and finally we just held each other and cried. After that the healing started.

I realized that we had to get to the mountains. Up in Colorado seemed like the logical place to go; but getting there would be a big problem. I found a big camouflaged Dodge Ram truck outside of Cleveland, Texas. We used that for several weeks; it took us to the Dallas-Ft Worth area where we hunted around for food supplies.

In a burned out mall near Ft Worth, we found a couple of starving yellow Lab puppies. They were the first things Michael showed any interest in, so I decided to keep them. I hoped that they would help him heal, and bring my old Michael back to me. Over time, with some food and lots of love, the dogs got stronger. They became very protective of us...and best of all they knew when any of the dragons were in the area. Michael came out of his self-imposed exile and joined the world again; I take no credit there, the two labs brought him back to life. He named them Tabs and Ash; to me they were simply the ‘Twins’. Michael kept his eye on them all the time we were moving as the dogs were alert to everything around us.

Traveling by night was definitely out, those things had great eyesight in the dark. We had to move by day carefully, and we got very good at it as we managed to cover a lot of ground. We steered clear of the marauding groups that were in the area. That’s when the dreams started coming. I was trying to make it to a place that I kept dreaming about; it was somewhere out west. I started to head across Texas towards New Mexico; for some reason it felt right to go this way. Then we got lucky, I found a Hummer abandoned in one of the small towns near Amarillo; we traveled comfortably in that for a long time. I was heading towards Four Corners, New Mexico. I figured that we could head into the mountains of Utah, up towards Capitol Reef National Park.

We ran into a small group of four people outside Albuquerque; they were just like us, scared and running. We talked about what we knew, about where we were trying to go and why; and we compared our dreams. The man in this little group seemed to be in charge. His name was Sam; he was a large man, a former Marine, somewhere in his late 40's or early 50's. He was fit and trim, he kept himself in shape, habit I guess. He sort of barked things out like he was giving orders. The woman with him calmed him down, and he began to relate his story. You couldn't blame him for being cautious. He hated those things with a passion; but he also recognized them as a formidable enemy. There wasn't much that could rattle a Marine, so it was kind of weird when his voice cracked as he spoke. He was the only one of us who had actually seen one of them. 'They're dragons I tell you. Never would have believed it if I hadn't seen one of them myself. Fire breathing and all, nothing would stop them, we fired everything at them and they just kept coming. They were so fucking big! You have no idea until you see one of them up close.' He took a long swallow from a bottle of Jack. Then he said something that caught my attention right away. He said he kept having the same damn dreams over and over again. They told him he had to keep moving north, northwest, towards the 'mountains in the mist.' I realized then that we had all been having the same dream.

He introduced his companions. The woman's name was Lucy. She was about 40, give or take a few, black hair pulled back and braided and twisted into a knot. She was about 5'5", kind of plumpish in that middle-aged way. She was scared too, but quick on her feet. She had made her way from Las Cruces all by herself – yes, she was gutsy! She had passed thru areas that were totally decimated; and thru a lot of areas that were still burning. She had a wonderful sense of humor, made jokes about the state of things. She never knew that she was the one who kept me sane throughout the next couple of months. She said she kept having these strange dreams of a mountain in mist, and safety. She had met up with the man about 2 weeks previous to running into us. She said he was a good decent man, he had been very kind to her and she trusted him.

They had two teenagers with them that they picked up along the way. The boy was about 16 or 17, he was jumpy, had that look of seeing too much too soon. Once he was probably the football hero, the big man at school; now he was just a scared kid. He was still pretty husky, stood 6' or so, sandy brown hair, and he carried a rifle with him. He was also angry as hell at the whole situation; a real fighter or he never would have made it this far. Said his name was Billy Rob; he had his arm protectively around the girl. He called her Ashley. She was about 16, a wispy-blonde, probably a former cheerleader; you know the thin-vulnerable type. She still had that 'deer in the headlights' look. She was probably part of the in-crowd in high school; the Homecoming Queen, and all that nonsense. What she had seen in the past couple of weeks was probably too much for her to take in. She was very jumpy, held onto the boy for dear life; she was going to have to toughen up or she would become a liability.

Sam suggested we travel together. Michael said he felt they were 'good' people and the 'twins' seemed to like them. The fact that we should stay together made sense. The night's dreams confirmed this, so we set out the next morning as one big 'family'.

That was when I first got the idea that some one or some thing was guiding us. I began to form an idea of sorts about all that had happened, about the world, and started to think of things in Biblical terms. I kept most of this to myself, not wanting to alarm the others, or give them cause to doubt my sanity. Shit, I doubted it!

We gassed up in a little town and headed out toward the desert. Something was pushing us to go, and go quickly. The dogs loved all the attention they were getting. And ever-vigilant Michael kept his eyes on the skies. During one stop we found shelter in some caves. We had no fire, as we couldn't take the chance. In the dark of night, any light can be seen a long way off. And we all knew their eyesight was something we couldn't afford to attract.

I knew the desert was cold at night, but we had good sleeping bags and we would be warm enough in them. Sometime during the night I felt Michaels hand on my leg.
“Something’s out there, the dogs are cowering.”

I got out the crossbow and slowly made my way towards the front of the cave. I listened for what seemed like an eternity. I could make out no sound; there was no wind, no moon, nothing. The dogs were still back there curled tightly together, heads down.

Then I heard it.... *Whoosh - whoosh!*

The hair on the back of my neck rose to sharp attention, chills ran down my spine; it was out there, up in the night sky. And then I saw it, reflected in the moons light as it made a low pass over the whole area. It was huge... even that word isn’t good enough. Black as coal, dripping blood from a recent kill I guessed.

Movement caught my eye down below as two horses darted out from a small arroyo and started to run like the wind. They were racing across the plain to the mountains on the other side.

Go, go you beauties... fly! I begged them to hurry.

The dragon spotted them, turned in mid-air and with lighting speed was upon them in seconds. I was sick to my stomach, but still watched in fascination as it swept them both up in its gigantic claws and began to feed. Lord Almighty, how were we ever going to survive, I asked myself. I made sure I was inside the cave just enough so it wouldn’t see me, and kept watch all night. It finally gave up and flew off to more fertile feeding grounds just before dawn. When the others rose I told them about our night visitor, they were none too happy. We agreed to put as many miles behind us as we could before stopping again.

By midday we came to a small rise that overlooked a ranch. We headed towards it to see if there were any horses. I still thought that horses were the best way to get where we were headed. The ranch was deserted, but there was a large barn out back. Sam and I decided to check it out and to our amazement found that the barn held 10 horses. Someone had kept this place going. We searched everywhere but found no one. There were four stunningly beautiful Arabian show horses; the other stalls held 5 Quarter horses. The last two stalls held a big Indian paint and a pony about 9 months old, just perfect for Michael to ride. There were saddles for all of us, and it didn’t take us long to get it together and get the hell out of there. I can tell you it was a little surreal using those beautiful Arabians as packhorses. We kept close to the mountains, and found shelter for the night in abandoned towns, and in caves. The ‘twins’ were growing at an alarming rate, getting really big; they had bonded strongly with Michael.

I became convinced that we were being ‘guided’ along. We seemed to make the right decisions, and always found what we needed at the right time. We discussed this aspect of our journey with each other, and agreed that a much ‘higher force’ was in play here.

A week later we reached a desert and could see in the distance a large mountain range that appeared to be covered by mist. As we crossed the desert we hardly ever saw any living thing. No birds, no lizards, no people... nothing. We headed towards the mountain quickly and the closer we got, the more it changed before our eyes. It appeared to be a series of valleys hidden in the large mountain chain. There would be plenty of places in these mountains to hide. We went over several ridges and ended up in a small valley. It seemed to be hidden from everything else by a thick mist that encircled the entire mountain. This would become home for a time, we set up a makeshift camp.

Sam and Michael and I explored the mountains and the surrounding area in the succeeding days. We found a second area, where we are now, and we set up a permanent camp. I decided to explore a little further on, and found the backside of the mountains.

I stood on the rim overlooking a grassy plain below. There was what appeared to be a town down there. Thru binoculars I could see there were a lot of large warehouses towards the end of the small town. And there were trucks strewn around one building, and some semis around the other two warehouses. I told Sam about it and we decided to take a look. Michael and the ‘twins’ came along for protection.

To our surprise the electricity was still on in all the buildings! These warehouses were self-sufficient; they had their own generator, and an unlimited fuel supply – they were solar powered! Inside we hit pay dirt; the warehouses held everything we needed to survive. One was a food center with a freezer unit stocked full. We weren’t going to starve after all. From what we could gather this was a distribution center for all of the surrounding towns and cities; so they were stocked full. We also found one warehouse loaded with everything but food. Clothing, furniture, beds, blankets, everything! We would be able to exist in relative comfort. None of us wanted to move into the town; no, we were safer in the mountains and we knew it. It was getting some of this stuff back to the campsite that was going to be a problem; but we would work it out, we had plenty of time now.

A year passed so fast we hardly noticed; we had all been so busy getting our new camp up and running. The security devices we had set up around the camp weren’t worth shit; it was the ‘twins’ who ended up warning us when we had company. Then the dreams started to inform us when people were headed our way. Our first band of stragglers came bounding out of the brush one month after our first anniversary. There were 12 of them, and they faced the growling ‘twins’ in fear. By this time they were quite a formidable looking pair; at least 250 pounds each.

Then a mountain of a man stepped forward, knelt down and talked to the dogs. They quieted and eventually tails wagged, and they licked his face as if in recognition. They accepted him and his group; that was good enough for us. He said his name was Big John; and he gave new meaning to the word ‘big’. He proved to be just the person we needed. He helped us to organize better, and he set up a much more effective security system for our perimeter. Oh, and he became my dearest friend.

Over the years we carefully built up the camp, we reinforced it, refined it. More stragglers came in every now and then, and they would all say the same thing more or less; ‘I was just drawn to this area; I couldn’t help myself, it was like a magnet was pulling me in this way; or ‘I dreamt of this place’. So we started to grow little by little over the next several years till we were over 150 people.

We’ve become pretty self-sufficient at this survival game. We had two farmers come in during year two. They taught us all about farming, and we rely on them greatly. Then an engineer appeared, and then a carpenter, and the list continued to grow on and on. Whatever, or whoever we needed would suddenly appear. We began to understand that we had all gathered here in this area for a reason. Each of us has the ‘dreams’ in one form or another; and we have come to believe that we have a special task down the road.

And then, towards the end of year two, I went off on a little exploring trek. It taught me a lesson I wouldn’t ever forget; and it also led me to where I found Jake. Everything changed after that, even me! Jake saved me, though he likes to say that I rescued him.... hell, the truth is - he saved us all! But then, that’s what he was sent to do - save us.

Oh - did I mention that Jake was a dragon?

We haven't seen any of the marauders for some time now. They seem to concentrate around the little populated areas that they can loot. Our main problem now is the mutant animals that make their way up the mountain every now and then. There seems to be an awful lot of them lately; we believe that there was a nuclear weapon used on the black fire dragons, and the mutants are the result of the fallout. Jake generally finds them before they get here, but a few have managed to slip thru our defenses. Then he, or Lady Jennie, takes them out quickly.

Lady Jennie is Michael's dragon.

Recently the dreams began to tell us about a new group of men coming our way. Jake said he was waiting for them to arrive; they had to be here before we could begin our task. They had been on the road for almost a year. They had all seen some terrible things, been thru some worse things, things that would stay with them forever. This group of men had been molded and finely tuned for a specific task. Now, they were ready to be used, so they were directed to the mountains.

They would have to fight their way up and over the mountain; evil doesn't like to give in easily.

Large black eyes watched intently as the exhausted men labored to climb up the east side of the mountain.

Alerted, the camp kept abreast of their progress. Four soldiers in green cammies marching thru their mountains. They watched as they passed thru the burned out forests; watched as they carefully picked a site and then made camp for the night. There was camaraderie among the men; they joked among themselves, they cared about each other, human traits. They watched as they stumbled into two of the mutant-bears; watched with fearful hearts as they fought for their lives; killed one, and ran from the other. How they took care of their mortally wounded comrade; and eventually mourned the death of their friend. They watched as they buried him carefully, deep in the ground. They laughed, they mourned; they felt. That proved that they were still human, proved that they were not one of the marauder groups. It was the only reason they were allowed to come any closer to the camp. That and the dreams; the dreams that said they would come.

After three days without food and water they stumbled into camp thirsty, hungry, dirty, and very jumpy. Both sides were a little wary of the other. These soldiers, these wild looking men wanted to know who was in charge. They were not quite what you would call aggressive; maybe belligerent was the best way to describe their attitudes. They were tired and hungry and didn't want to play any word games. They had been thru a lot, but then so had we all. The leader of these men was asking politely who was in charge.

"We don't want to cause any trouble, honest. We've been looking for this place..." He was looking around for anyone exhibiting any authority. The woman stepped forward; and the man was taken aback for a second. *It's her!* He quickly recovered, but she had noticed.

She spoke softly, "Jake is in charge of this camp, but he is away right now. Your questions will be answered later; you men are worn out, you need to eat and drink, and rest. I believe it has been three days since you've eaten."

A large man said in a stony voice, "Yes major, we could have picked you off at any time when you entered our mountains. Gentlemen, please come along ..."

They were led further into the mountain on a well-worn trail, two men on each side of them with rifles. About an hour later they came upon another camp, a more permanent one. They were led thru an opening in the side of a mountain, taken down a long walkway wide enough for at least four men to walk abreast, and into a gigantic cave.

Daniel quickly scanned the place taking everything in. There were long tables lined up; and a large cooking area towards the back of the cave with a stove and a huge oven set into the side of the wall. His nose perked up at the aroma wafting its way thru the group. *This is a mess hall!*

"Sam, would you please bring some coffee, ice tea, and food for these men; they look like they can use it?" The woman said sweetly.

A big man came forward with some mugs and a large pot of coffee. He wasn't fat, just big; big muscles, arms like a wrestler with a chest to match. He set them on the table along with a jar of sugar. *Sugar!*

“Take what you want, we’ve got plenty,” he announced smiling.

They have plenty? Former military by the cut of him, Daniel bet. But not in command, no, he deferred to the woman; she wore confidence like a badge.

Behind the woman was that giant holding a rifle; silently watching them. Daniel had a pretty good idea that he didn’t need the rifle, he was probably very quick on his feet; he wouldn’t want to provoke him.

“Big John,” the woman said leaning back to talk to him. He bent and she gave him some instructions and he left quickly.

“Gentlemen, eat and drink and then rest; you all look beat, we can talk later; any objections?” Her eyes went over them, “Good! Sam, would you call for me when they’re rested and refreshed. We’ll meet back here.”

She turned and marched out of the cave, but not before she turned one more time and stared at Daniel. Then as if in conversation with someone, she murmured, “Yes, it’s him alright. Blast those damn dreams!”

A good-looking young man came to her side. He carried himself with the same air of confidence as the woman, as if they shared the some secret.

“Hey, don’t get so upset. We knew they were coming. You just don’t like being pushed into something you didn’t think up yourself. Admit it, you’re a control freak.”

She ruffled his hair and gave him a hug, “you know me so well Michael, you smart-ass, you!”

**High above a pair of large black eyes that saw far more than just men watched them.
*The man is finally here, now we can begin.***

Daniel and his men stuffed their faces with the best food they had eaten in months. A sweet-faced woman brought them several pitchers of iced tea - *ice?* They ate pork chops, fried chicken and huge batches of mashed potatoes and gravy! And there was corn on the cob, and green beans, and biscuits with honey.

They have salt, and sugar...shit they have ice! My God, Daniel thought shoving mashed potatoes into his mouth, the dreams were right! After searching for so long, we finally found the place. And the woman is here- she's real... so the rest must be true too!

When they finished eating they were taken to a holding area. Sam told them they could rest in safety; no one would bother them. They had been put in another cave, a temporary one. It was set up with some bunk beds, and a table and some chairs.

Makeshift barracks, Daniel thought, transition area.

Their things were brought in and placed on the beds; they had been gone over thoroughly. Daniel had expected it, probably Big John. He was too tired to care right now; all he wanted to do was sleep. He joined his friends and plopped down on a bed and was out in a matter of minutes.

Six hours later they woke up completely refreshed. Steve was excited, "Dan, they said we can take a shower. They have showers! Do you know how long it has been since we were clean? Damn man, this has got to be the place in the dreams!" Steve was an unfailing optimist; always saw the best possibilities in any situation.

Jerry agreed with him. "They could have locked us up, or worse. Did you see the looks on the faces of the people? I tell you it was like they were expecting us. They have the dreams too, I'm sure of it."

"How do you feel Dan? Real good, eh, and full of energy too?" Steve was grinning from ear to ear. "This is the place Dan, I'm sure of it... it just 'feels' like it."

There was a knock; and the young man from the Hall entered and looked around. He was in his early twenty's, tall and lean, but there was hard muscle under those clothes. He had a pair of intense hazel eyes. He greeted them with a big smile.

"Good afternoon, my name is Michael. If you'd like to clean up, grab your stuff and follow me."

They looked at each other, shrugged, and grabbed their gear and followed him out of the cave. He took them out and down a pathway that let all the way down to a scooped out area on the side of the mountain. There was a huge waterfall just beyond with a wide ledge that went all the way behind and thru the falls.

"Nature gave us the perfect shower. It's cold, but it works! Do you remember where the Hall is located; the place where you all ate?" They all nodded, "come by when you're done and we'll talk. Enjoy your shower!" He turned around and left them there.

Steve was the first who said what they were all thinking, "They're giving us free rein. They could have set guards on us, but they didn't." He had undressed quickly and had retrieved his ditty bag from his backpack.

"They're not afraid of us," he shouted as he stepped into the falls, "Holy shit! Ooooh...this is cold!"

Daniel and Jerry stripped also and stepped into the cold water; there were loud shouts of; "Oh shit that's cold," by both men. They washed and shaved and after a time didn't mind the cold water; it felt good to be clean again. After they dried, dressed and dumped their gear back at the cave, they headed for the large Hall.

The people they met along the way seemed friendly, and Steve had no problem talking with many of them. They didn't get any information, just smiling faces pointing the way to the 'Great Hall'. They entered the Hall and as they came around the corner they could see that several tables had been set up facing each other. Sam, Michael, and the woman sat facing them with Big John standing behind the woman. But the sight that startled them all was lying on the floor in front of them. Two of the biggest Labs they'd ever seen. *My God, they had to be 300 lbs each!*

"Refreshed gentlemen? Please, come and have a seat," the woman purred as they came in. "In front are the 'twins', Ash and Tabs. You don't have to worry, they don't bite... much."

There was a lot of laughter coming from the assembled people behind her, in the back of the cave.

"There are pitchers of hot coffee and ice tea on the table; pick your poison. Lucy will be bringing some biscuits and honey in a minute. Make yourselves comfortable."

Daniel and his men sat down facing this inquisition board.

"First, if I may, a quick question," the woman stared intently at each of them. "Do you gentlemen have dreams? Very special dreams, some might say, very strange dreams?"

Daniel and his men all nodded yes.

"Good," the woman sat back and smiled, "If you have no objection I'd like to begin by telling you all the story of how we came to be here."

She began to relate the story of their journey and arrival in these mountains. She told them everything, even the way she felt, as she was instructed by Jake to do. The only part she left out was the part about Jake.

When she finished she looked Daniel in the eye, "so what's your story major? And please, the truth."

Daniel met her stare, and answered it with one of his own. *Damn she was direct.* Everyone was sitting there, arms folded, waiting. He knew they would be judged by what he said, and how he said it. Daniel looked around the camp, and back at the woman.

“We must have looked like wild men coming into your camp. We were dirty, hungry, and thirsty. Yet you took us in and fed us, took us where we could rest and clean ourselves up. I see no reason to lie to you people. I’m sure that this is the place described in our dreams.” He looked around at the people and saw some heads nodding in agreement. He took a deep breath and began.

“Well, I can tell you how it started. I know it’s the truth because we were there; we saw it all first hand. Some archeologists showed up at Camp Bradley, in northern Nevada with permits allowing them to start a dig on base. They found a large underground cavern. Last word received from the group was that they were going in to explore it. Shortly after that all contact was lost with the base. When we went to have a look-see, the dragons had emerged from the cavern. We tried to get a handle on the situation, but there was nothing in our arsenal that would stop these beasts. They took out jets like they were bothersome flies, pests to be dealt with as soon as they showed up. Washington sent me to Thunder Mountain to try to find a way to destroy them. The scientists were stumped; we never really found a weakness we could use against them. After Washington was taken out, they buttoned up the Mountain and prepared for a long siege. That’s where we came from, the Denver area, Thunder Mountain, where what’s left of the government resides.”

Daniel stood up and introduced the guys. “My name is Daniel, Major Daniel Sherman/US Army Special Ops. Over there is Sgt. Jerry Lakers - my point man and engineer. And this here is Sgt Steve Bowman, demolition expert.” Both men stood and sort of waved to the assembled group. Steve leaned over the table and saluted both dogs; and the crowd laughed and cheered him on. Daniel continued on ignoring Steve’s antics, “There was another, but he was killed several nights ago,” he said softly, as if in reverence.

“Inside the Mountain you’d swear that nothing has changed, the government still goes on, with all the niceties; but the minute you go outside you know it has changed. They want things to go on ‘as usual’, but they fail to see that that time is gone; it is never going to come back. We could see they were all living a lie. That was when the dreams started for us. I don’t know how to explain about them telling us to leave the Mountain. We compared notes later and realized we were all having the same sort of dreams; they were urging us to ‘get out fast.’ We knew that sooner or later it was going to fall apart. The four of us decided we couldn’t stay locked up in there – we had to leave. So we came up with a plan they would go for; we convinced them that a little reconnaissance would be a good thing. We left and never looked back.”

“We’ve been on the road for the last year and a half. Believe me, it’s been an education. We’ve gone all the way back to the east coast, and there is nothing left there, nothing. We went to Washington, and that place is a real mess. We decided to head west and started across the country. We came across some areas that were totally destroyed...nothing left but ash. People were trying to exist at the Stone Age level. And then, not 20 miles away, we would come to some towns that hadn’t been touched at all. The townsfolk in these places wanted nothing to do with us. They would give us shelter for a night, and they were nice and all; but they would ask us to leave in the morning... real polite-like, holding shotguns.”

Daniel took a breath and looked at the faces of the crowd. He could see he was getting thru to some.

“In some areas we had to fight our way thru marauders, and then run like hell to get away from them. There are several bands of them all across the country. If they ever get a strong leader and unite, we could all be in some serious danger. On one occasion they were lying in wait for us, would have killed us for sure, but a huge black dragon was flying overhead and attacked them before they could spring their trap. We were real lucky that time.”

Daniel stopped for a moment and took a long drink of his ice tea.

“After awhile it was like you said, something seemed to be pulling us in this direction. We had the same dreams, but somehow they were patterned for each one of us. And we couldn’t quite remember all of them.... just that they had something to do with the mountains. So we kept going west. We crossed thru many towns and cities that had been abandoned; same thing with ranches as we went further west. We crossed a desert and then we came to the foothills. There were signs of some kind of terrible battle down there, lots of bones and ash. As we began to climb the mountain I began to feel that we weren’t alone; you know the feeling.” Several heads nodded in agreement.

We needed to get into some cover, so we headed up into what we thought was the thickest part of the hills. We heard some really weird sounds down there. There was something lurking about down there that wasn’t right. After a bit, we all agreed that we felt like we were being stalked. We moved along real quiet like and tried not to leave any kind of a trail. But two nights later ‘they’ found us. There were two of them, and there was a terrible fight. I’d rather not remember that fight; we lost one of our own, a good man. One of those ‘things’ destroyed our food and water supplies. I’m not ashamed to say that we ran like hell. After three days with no food or water and barely any sleep we saw the mist and headed for it like a steamroller. It was like stepping into one of our dreams; that was when we sort of stumbled into your lower camp. I know we must have looked a sight, but believe me, we are not your enemies; we mean you no harm.”

Everyone looked at the woman, waiting. She seemed to be listening to someone, but he couldn’t see an earpiece on her. Her brow furrowed and then she sort of nodded and turned to us, “Jake says you’re telling the truth; you can stay if you want.”

A shout went up by some of the people in the cave, “Yea! All right, about time!”

There was a big sigh of relief on Daniel’s part. Sam came forward and shook their hands. Daniel tried to see through the throng of well-wishers to the woman. He caught a glimpse of her smiling at the open display of acceptance from the community.

Sam stood up, “all right everyone, give them a break. You all know the routine; rules first,” Sam was speaking as the authority this time, “listen up, come on settle down!”

He waited till there was silence.

“Okay, there are two rules you need to follow here in the camp. Number one, everyone here works for the benefit of the Community; safety of the Community comes first. Number two; we look out for each other, treat each other as our brothers and sisters, and help out where and whenever it’s needed. That covers everything.” He looked at Daniel and Steve and smiled.

“Most of the time we’re safe from ‘THEM’,” he said raising his head, “but occasionally one will get curious and fly over. When that happens Jake gives us enough of a warning to get to shelter. Then he takes care of the problem, same thing when one of the beasts makes it up here.”

Daniel let out a short whistle, "I'd like to meet this Jake. Taking out a dragon like it was just a bit of a inconvenience, this guy must be something else." He could hear low snickers and laughter in the background. (*Who is this Jake; and this woman who haunts my dreams?*)

The woman cut in, "that will come later Daniel. Sam sort of runs the camp down here; he'll find you and your men a place to bunk down, for the time being. And he'll show you all the routine. We'll soon see if you'll mean to stay and be a part of us...or if you'll can't take the hard work and move on." With that she turned around and left the group with the dogs galloping behind her.

"What did I say...or do?" Daniel scratched his head turning toward the others.

Sam stepped forward and took Daniels arm, "that is Jake's Lady, Daniel. Don't take it to heart man, it's not personal. She's got to be real careful in these times. She doesn't trust anyone at first; you've got to prove yourself. And time takes care of that; I reckon she'll be watching you men for a long time. Being military and all, she's going to need extra convincing – even if Jake says you're all OK."

Daniel whipped around quickly, "just who the hell is this mysterious Jake? What's so special about him? How come he's not here to judge us face to face, how come..."

"Easy, easy... hold on man! This is the rules, we all made them and even Jake abides by some of them. We've managed to keep out the fire-dragons and the riff-raff all these years. We're not changing things now. The safety of the Community is most important; it always comes first. We'll see how you men measure up in six months. By then just maybe you'll have a different attitude about things, we'll see. Now let's gather up your gear and we'll move you and your men to a more permanent cave."

The cavern they were in was on the side of a granite rock mountain. It was bored out and the huge cavern was the area they used for cooking meals, meetings, and the like, Sam explained. Everyone took meals here. And after the meal was done the business of the camp was discussed each night, any new ideas were explored. If anyone had a grudge it was aired and action was taken. Everything was shut down at dusk - no lights, or fires. People went to their prospective 'homes'. Complete blackout procedure was followed. A huge boulder was then pushed in front of the 'Hall' and a large flap of thick black canvass was dropped from the inside. Coleman lanterns were then lit and these people knew that they were going to be in there for the night. Most of the time they were just the 3 cooks in the large cave; they preferred the safety of the Hall to the unsure aspects of being outside. Sam took Daniel and his men thru the entire camp. Actually, now that he could see more of it, it was almost a town. There was a street, of a sort, trails leading off in all directions. There were what appeared to be some trailers actually cut into the side of the mountain.

Daniel was wondering; *how did they do that? How the hell did they get trailers up here?* There were also a lot of caves on the other side that were cut right into the mountainside - *homes?* People were settling in for the night.

"We put the new people up here in the temporary caves. If you decide to stay you can carve out your own place." Sam could see Daniel looking up the side of the mountain. There were a series of steps of a sort cut into the side of the mountain leading up into the mist. It seemed to cover the whole mountaintop.

"What's up there"? Daniel asked.

"Just some more caves. Michael lives up there with Lady Jennie, his companion, as does Jake and his Lady. Michael was the man who showed you to the showers; the 'twins' are his."

Daniel stopped, “Wait a minute that would make him her grandson. No way! She said he was a kid when they came here. That would make him... what, 14 now. That was a man of at least 23 or 24. Are you kidding me?”

“No, not at all Daniel... he went off one day and when he returned that’s what he looked like. She and Jake weren’t bothered by it at all, said they expected it sooner or later.”

Sam watched Daniel’s expression as he continued on.

“But then she did the same thing some years back. She was a 74 year old lady when all this began, and within three years of our settling here she changed into what you see now.”

Daniel’s eyes grew as Sam continued on, “oh, we’re living in strange times I tell you; nothing would surprise me anymore, not with the dreams and all.”

The next six months were an education, as well as a real physical workout. When they said we would work, they meant it. We toiled every other day in the fields planting, working the soil, weeding, and harvesting what was ready. This work had priority over everything else. They had a cornfield with the biggest ears of corn I've ever seen. Green beans, potatoes, yellow squash, and tomatoes were planted and cared for lovingly. The fields were in a small valley protected on all sides by the mountains; it had the richest soil I'd ever seen. These fields were cultivated with great care, always two in use and one recouping for a planting season. Two of the men in the community were former farmers; so the fields were under their care. Whatever they said to do, everyone did, including the woman. She was right there working alongside everyone else; she certainly wasn't afraid of hard work. And many nights I could see her walking around the camp. I was really amazed at the way the camp was run. For the most part everyone was real friendly, they all truly cared about each other; they helped each other without being asked; did tasks without complaining. They were all a tightly knit group and genuinely seemed to like each other's company.

The rest of our time was spent re-enforcing the Camp, and scouting the surrounding areas. How they covered the distance they did was beyond me. They must have a mode of transportation I've yet to see. They still had the horses; they were kept in an area that allowed them to run free. They stayed close to the camp never taking off very far. They were well cared for by the young woman called Ashley. The horses came to her when she called.

She had blossomed into quite a beauty. From what I could see, the scared girl the woman had spoken of had turned into an Amazon. Dressed in light tan leather, she wore a crossbow across her back, and wasn't afraid to use it. She made a rather striking first appearance.

Steve took one look and claimed her for himself. "Yup, she's the one I saw in my dreams. Damn what glorious luck!"

Steve offered his services to clear out some land, and also to enlarge the cavern where we all ate. He and Jerry conferred on the how-to's before they set any charges. In the end, he made the Hall twice its size and even added several storage rooms for the food and equipment. Then he made several rooms in the opposite mountainside that could be used for quarters for a majority of the people. They made one for males, and a separate one for the females. The women seemed to appreciate that the most. The fact that they had privacy again was a big thing for them. The guys were 'in' as far as the women were concerned

I did manage to make friends with one person in the camp. There was a young girl named Sally that everyone doted on. She was very shy and sometimes I would catch her starring at me. She would blush bright red and grin at me. She was between 9 or 10 years old, a vision of reddish blonde hair and big beautiful blue eyes. She also had an ugly slash across her face; it went from one ear across the bridge of her nose to the other ear. Sam told me that Jake had found her lying in a field while on patrol several years back. She was badly injured, but he had brought her back with him anyway. It was a long time before they knew if she would make it or not. Sam and Lucy had taken her in and became her surrogated parents. One day I had come across a baby rabbit out in the fields, without thinking I picked it up and gave it to her on my way to dinner that night. Her face lit up; I thought she was going to cry, and then she hugged my arm and whispered... 'Thank you Daniel so much!' Sweet kid. After that I made a point of looking for something each time we were out in the fields. She would wait for me just before dinnertime by the great Hall, and I would surprise her. It was a silly little routine that we performed, but it made her happy.

The woman kept her distance but was forever watchful. She seemed to be warming up to Jerry and Steve much more than me. Maybe I just rubbed her the wrong way. She was getting especially friendly with Steve, but he was a likeable guy. I also began to notice that Steve wasn't around a couple of evenings a week. I had assumed at first that he had gotten together with Ashley. Then he said that he wanted to get his own place, and he had been told that he could. So he moved out and into a cave on the other side, at the base of the 'misty mountain'.

On one occasion I remember he came into the Hall for breakfast, and he was acting all weird. He had this goofy grin on his face and everyone smiled knowingly. I just assumed he was in love, and Ashley had finally accommodated him. I couldn't have been more off the mark. He wouldn't talk to me about it, just insisted that everything was great. Jerry had moved out also and he seemed to have settled in real good. His services were much in demand and he was kept busy all over the camp. So it was just me in the temporary bunk and I saw no reason to move.

At night sometimes I'd wake up and take a walk outside. The camp would be silent and I would listen to the sounds of the night. I would see her walking the camp. On several such nights I tried to start a conversation, but she would always cut me short. 'I'm on duty, or, I don't have time to talk right now'. She always had an excuse; it was like she was avoiding me. But my dreams said that would change.

One particular night I woke from a rather explicit dream of us and decided to take a shower to 'cool' off. I headed down to the waterfall and came around the bend when I realized that someone was there already. To my surprise, I saw it has her.

I didn't want to be a Peeping Tom, but I was fixed to the spot as I watched her. She had a perfect body; lean, hard but still rounded in the right places. Curves that were where they were suppose to be. An ass that lifted and arched so that a man would fit right there, perfectly. A tummy that still had a bit of a pouch to it, all in all very womanly, very sensual.

I know that body so well!

Suddenly I heard a familiar sound. It was the flapping of wings passing overhead.*Whoosh!* And I could feel wind on my face. I crouched down behind a boulder and looked up; but it was so dark I could see nothing. The woman looked above her without any concern. She grabbed a towel, and dried herself off slowly; I was hooked watching her and envisioning some pretty explicit things in my mind. She dressed, and then she looked up again, and waved.

I quickly looked up and still saw nothing. There was something strange going on here.

Kate heard Jake calling to her and she finished drying herself and hurried up to the mountaintop. As she stepped out onto the plateau she stopped dead in her tracks. There before her was Steve, sitting crossed legged on a boulder, deep in conversation with Jake. There was a stupid looking grin on his face.

She chuckled to herself; *they all get that look the first time.* She sighed, *my, my, but he was quick to catch on so fast.* She put on her best smile and walked out into the open.

One sunny cold afternoon, almost a month later, Michael approached me and asked if I would be interested in a 'food run' the next day. He said we would be gone for 2 to 3 days. Said he could use a military type to ride shotgun on the trip. Though he didn't expect any trouble, you could never be too careful he said. I quickly agreed, and he said he would wake me before the others got up. I had begun to feel a sense of acceptance from these people; maybe this was where I was supposed to be, and maybe they were beginning to feel that I could be trusted. It was no secret that Michael was the woman's favorite; so she probably sent him with the offer. Maybe she was coming around.

That evening, I headed down to the Hall for dinner feeling a lot better. The future was beginning to look up after all. I had made friends with Big John, and he seemed to genuinely like me. I had thought up some ideas to implement for better safety for the community. And I was thinking of maybe proposing setting up a training schedule for some of the young men in the use of the firearms we brought with us. As I rounded the corner I saw Sally come running out of the brush, eyes wide with fear.

"Run.... it's coming! Oh, Daniel... run!"

She screamed in horror as not thirty feet behind her 'it' burst out of the brush.

I thought at first it was a grizzly bear; on closer look it was much more. Mutated in some twisted way; it stood 8 or 9 feet tall, unbelievably huge. Its fur was all matted and crusted, and it had oozing open sores all over its body. Foaming at the mouth, bloodshot eyes crusted over and oozing, growling and snarling, it went for Sally. I looked around for something I could use as a weapon, saw an axe leaning beside a pile of wood and grabbed it and then I turned to face this thing. I don't mind saying that the hair on the back of my neck rose as I stood there. Sally dove for me and I grabbed her arm and swung her around behind me and let her go tumbling away. I could see out of the corner of my eye some of the guys catch her. They were all gesturing and yelling something, but I couldn't make out what they were saying. The thing was making so much noise I could barely hear myself think. With Sally out of its reach, it took aim at me. It roared loudly and reared up on its hind feet and I swear it seemed to have grown another ten feet! I roared back at the thing just as loudly.

Oh God! This is not good.

It swung one of its massive paws and I just barely got out of the way.

Lord, grant me strength to protect these people!

I swung the axe with all my might and caught it in the chest area sending it spinning. But in lightening speed it recovered, shifted its feet, turned and swinging caught me on my right shoulder with one of its massive claws and ripped across my chest. It sent me flying like a paper doll.

Damn that hurt like hell!

I was opened up from my right shoulder all the way across my right breast; blood was pouring out all over. I could hear Sally screaming behind me. I staggered to my feet as fast as I could; this was not how I planned to go out.

This wasn't in any of my dreams? Damn, where was everyone, why didn't anybody get our weapons and start shooting?

I was staggering about when it reared up again and started to come at me. Suddenly, inside my head, I heard him.

"Daniel ... please get out of my way – duck! NOW!"

I dove for the ground turning as I fell. I saw a giant black shape swoop down and grab the bear-thing in one gigantic claw; and off it went into the night. The look on the bear's face was priceless! Laying

there on the ground and looking up into the black sky, my life's blood pouring out, I was positive that I had finally gone stark raving mad.

I was stammering like an idiot, "... did you see? It was...son of a bitch! You saw it...it was a dragon! Big - big dragon! Did you see... he spoke to me... spoke... said to get out of his way!"

Suddenly people surrounded me. Some were shouting 'thank-you', others laughing, Sally was sobbing, and still others were saying I needed a doctor. And then the woman was there by my side. Her eyes told me I was hurt worse than I thought; there was a look of great concern on her face. She was pressing something to my chest and shoulder; she had tears in her eyes.

Sam said something to her, and Steve even looked a little worried, "hang in there Dan, try to stay with us buddy."

Things were getting fuzzy; it was getting dark, and then the pain started.

Oh man this hurts... I'm on fire!

The woman had knelt down beside me, and as I reached out for her, she took my hand in hers and held it to her breast. She bent close to my ear and whispered: "you are not crazy Daniel - that was Jake."

Of course it was!

Everything went black; and then she was there again. She was telling me to hold on. The pain started again and it was like nothing I ever felt before, burning, searing. I must have blacked out several times. I seem to remember being carried toward the mountain as they started up a pathway. Next thing we were inside the damn thing still going up.

Then I remember feeling the air rushing by, it felt so good. And the woman was there by my side and I heard her saying; "...hurry, he doesn't look too good, the poison is in his bloodstream already." Darkness enveloped me again.

Suddenly I woke with a start, I was on the ground, and I couldn't see anyone.

Then she was there bending over me saying something, "Daniel, are you awake? Daniel! Can you understand what I'm saying?"

I felt like I was on fire, my throat was so dry I could hardly answer her, "...yes...yes," I whispered. It took such an effort just to speak.

She bent over me and whispered in my ear; "Use your mind Daniel, answer me with your mind. Think what you want to say." She was holding my head in her hands looking right into my eyes.

I was thinking; Shit woman, if I did that you'd have a real fit. I don't know if I can stand much more of this fucking pain or this damn heat... I'm about to burn alive. Damn woman, what a time to check out; God you are so beautiful. I really thought the dreams were right. I'm sorry to disappoint you; sorry I made such a fucking mess of this.

You are not a disappointment to my Lady, Daniel. She was most impressed, as was I; by the way you conducted yourself. You did not know about me. You knew that thing was probably going to kill you, yet you stood your ground to keep it from the Community. Well done, Daniel!

It's you! You're in my head again... you're Jake, right?

Yes Daniel.

Where the hell are you? Daniel's eyes were wide as he tried to turn his head around, looking about.

I can't see you... I know you're here; I can feel you.

Look up Daniel, look up and listen to me...your life may depend on it.

The woman was shaking her head yes and pointing up. Look up Daniel, please.

I looked up into the night sky and tried to focus, tried to see thru the fog and suddenly there he was. Good God in Heaven!

Before me was this huge massive head, black as night with silver stripes on the ridges of its nose. And it had these big black eyes staring at me; but somewhere in those eyes I could see intelligence, awareness. I should have been trying to run, but for some reason I wasn't afraid at all; I listened.

You are injured very badly Daniel. That thing drew your blood and infected you with its poison. It has entered your bloodstream. I must have your permission to heal you. Daniel, are you listening to me? I must have your permission; I cannot touch you without it. Daniel...?

Yeah, yeah, I hear you, go ahead, do what you must - damn I'm so hot, hurt so bad... go for it Jake!

See if you can get some fluids into him after I finish, Jake told Kate. Then he turned to Steve and Big John, Now hold him down, this is really going to hurt...

Big John, Steve, Jerry, and Michael held Daniel down as Jake loomed above him. Jake reared up on his hind feet and spread his wings and opened his huge jaws. He shot out a flame high into the night sky. Then he bent his head down and let his saliva run out of his mouth and drip down to cover Daniel's wound. Steam rose from the area, and Daniel screamed, arched his back off the stretcher, and passed out.

Jake, do you think he'll make it? Kate asked very concerned.

My Lady, he will be very sick for several days. But I believe he will pull through. He has a very strong will- that should help him fight the infection. I have burned out most of it; only time will tell if I was able to get it all.

Daniel moaned in his sleep and then was quiet. Kate was still worried. But Jake was right, he was strong willed, he would be a fighter. But she still had to get him inside now.

"Guys, will you take him to my quarters," she asked Steve, Jerry and Big John. "He'll need looking after tonight if he's to make it."

Steve and Jerry carried Daniel on the stretcher down the side of the mountain and into another huge cave. The cave had been divided into several living areas. One was a sitting area complete with rug, sofa and two large leather chairs. Just beyond that was an alcove of sorts that led a bedroom. A king size bed dominated the room, there were also two dressers and a nightstand; another large Persian rug was on the floor, Coleman lanterns lit the way.

They carried Daniel to the bed, folded down the blankets and place him on it. The woman began to remove his boots; Jerry and Steve removed the rest of his clothes. They washed him off and bandaged his shoulder up and got him settled in the bed.

“Thanks guys, I’ll need a basin of water and a towel,” she said to no one in particular.

“I’ll get them, my Lady.” Sally answered right away from the cave entrance. She had a worried look on her face. “I’ll get them and anything else you need. It was my entire fault.” She burst into tears.

“It’s all right Sally. He’s going to be okay. He’s a strong man, he’ll be real sick for a day or two, but he will make it.” Lady Kate went to her and put her arm around her to ease her worry. “It was not your fault.” Sally let out a long breath nodded and ran off to fetch the items.

Daniel was unconscious for about 16 hours. He was fighting the infection that had engulfed his body. The acid from Jake’s saliva had destroyed most of the bacteria, but some had entered his bloodstream and this was what he was fighting. The woman didn’t leave his side. She kept putting cold compresses on his forehead, and wiping his neck and chest. With Big John and Steve’s help she had bathed his heated body twice. Several times he yelled out in his delirium, calling on the names of those who were long dead. She could see what their deaths had done to him. It was all she and Steve could do to keep him in the bed. It was touch and go for a while, but around 4 pm the next day the fever finally broke. She sent Steve off to bed, and then she wrapped a blanket around herself and curled up in one of the big over stuffed chairs. She was so tired that she fell into a deep sleep almost immediately.

Daniel opened his eyes. It was very quiet and there was little light from a lamp. He tried to raise his head but he couldn’t. It was pounding, and he felt so weak. He could barely raise his arm to his head. He tried to focus, but even that was too much of an effort. Slowly he turned his head to see where he was, and it was then that he saw her asleep in the chair beside the bed. He stared at her for a long time. She really was an attractive woman, but so damn tough. Then he remembered her kneeling down beside him, holding his hand, telling him to hang on, and soothing him with her concern.

Just like the dreams.

Memories started to flood his mind. There were flashes of Sally screaming; the ‘thing’ charging; burning pain in his chest; blood flowing on the ground, and the woman by his side; so tender, so soft. His mind was trying to play catch up. There was something else; he was trying to remember...

Oh shit - I remember! Daniel shook, eyes wide. *Jake...huge...towering over me.... he was talking to me... the burning... Oh God, the pain!*

His mind was trying to hold down the rising panic in his gut, but in his weakened state he was losing the battle. Daniel closed his eyes and slipped into unconsciousness again. A stronger will than his lulled him back to sleep.

Sleep Daniel, sleep. You can remember tomorrow, you need rest now.

When the woman woke it was dark outside. She went over and checked on Daniel; he was sleeping peacefully. She changed his bandage and saw that his wound was healing already. The fever that had raged for so long had broken, and now he was in a deep restful healing sleep. She finished with his bandage and stood and looked down at him lying there.

He's a rugged looking, she thought, chiseled features, and a very strong will, like in the dreams. She could see he was in good shape; his upper chest and arms were well developed. His body was lean and hard. His salt & pepper hair was long (as was most men), and he kept it tied with a piece of leather at the nape of his neck. She brushed his hair away from his face. She had always been drawn to his eyes; they were grayish in color, and could bore thru a person. There was a tuft of salt and pepper hair on his chest. I've always been a sucker for a guy with chest hair. She lightly dragged her hand across the left side of his chest. He had a strong masculine smell, not all that unpleasant. She could imagine his hands on her doing what he did in the dreams... damn it! I've got to stop doing this... it's those damn dreams! She could hear a deep chuckle filling her mind, all right Jake, I get the point!

She got up and went toward the back of the cave where she had a dressing room. She washed up and brushed her teeth and changed her clothing. *God I'm hungry! Better go now before he wakes and get something to eat. And bring some soup back up here for him.* Just as she was leaving the cave Steve came in.

He smiled at her, "How's he doing?"

"The fever really broke this time; he's in a deep healing sleep now. I'm going to get something to eat, would you mind staying here till I get back?"

"I was about to suggest the same thing. Everyone wants to know how he's doing. He's a hero to them; the way he stood up to that thing. I don't know if I would've had the courage to do the same. Of course, I knew about Jake and he didn't; any way you look at it, it took guts!"

"You don't have to convince me, Steve," she said, softly putting her hand on Steve's shoulder..

Yes, and he will be more important to our survival than you think, My Lady. Jake added, but now you must refresh yourself with good food and drink. Go, he will sleep for some time. I will watch over him. Go with her Master Steve, she is weakened also, and can use a friend to fend off all the questions.

Thanks Jake, I could use some food and drink myself! Steve grabbed a jacket for her.

Thank you Jake, thank you my friend. Kate was tired, bone tired. I do not know what I would do without you. You are my rock.

I thought I was a Dragon! Jake said in a joking manner.

You know exactly what I mean! You just wanted to see if you could still get a rise out of me.

Ah, you know me too well, My Lady, he said softly, almost lovingly. You are very tired My Lady, you need food and rest. Now go, both of you!

They walked outside the cave to a pathway and followed it down to a landing; from there they went inside a smaller cave and continued down about a hundred feet. There they came to another opening which brought them to a stairway along the side of the mountain leading downward towards the camp.

Steve mentioned how cool the evening was and Kate speculated that winter would come early this year. As they entered the great Hall everyone stopped talking and looked in their direction.

Sam and Lucy came up to them. Sally ran across the Hall from the kitchen area. "Is he ok ; is he going to make it?" they asked in unison.

"Yes, yes. The fever broke and he's in the healing sleep now." She said it loud enough so all would hear the news, "Jake says he thinks we got to the poison in time, he says Daniel is strong and a fighter. All we can do now is wait and see."

"All right! Yea!" Several cheered.

Big John came up to her, "is there anything I can do to help? I like the guy Kate; I think he'd be good for us, for the Community."

"Thank you for the offer John," she placed her hand on his arm, "but believe me, all we can do is wait. It's all up to Daniel now. On a positive note, Jake has every confidence that he will pull thru."

Sam came up behind Kate and Steve and slipped his arms into theirs and led them to a table. "Come and sit, I'll get you two something to eat and drink. You must be starving; you've been up there for a day. We were beginning to get worried."

Two big steaming plates of food were brought to their table. Steve attacked the food with gusto; Kate wasn't far behind him. They didn't realize just how hungry they were until they were on their second helping. Stuffed mouths murmured, "Umm... this is great Sam," and "oh I want more of this... umm, thank you."

"You know Kate, I've been thinking about those beasts," Steve began as he was pouring honey on his second plate of biscuits; "maybe I could rig up some kind of a warning device. Something we could avoid, but a dumb beast wouldn't notice. At least we would have a warning the next time one of them makes it up here. That was too close a call. If Daniel hadn't been there, Sally and a lot of the others would have been killed before Jake could have taken him out."

"We think a lot alike Steve. I've been trying to come up with something myself. Why don't you get on it and let me know what you recommend we do. When Daniel is out of the woods so to speak, I'll take you to town and we can get any kind of equipment you may need. And you would finally get to fly again," she looked at him with a sly smile.

"Oh, don't you be teasing me now; you know I've been dying for another ride. I'll have something for you by tomorrow."

She knew the promise of a ride on Jake would motivate him.

After they finished eating, she asked Sam if he had any soup. She wanted to take some with her just in case Daniel woke up.

“Lucy figured you would want something like that so she made a batch of chicken soup. It’s all ready to go. And here’s a thermos of tea too, I figure you’ll need that for yourself!”

“Thanks Sam, you’re a doll! I’m going to walk the camp first. I’ll stop by and pick these up before I head back up top.” She stopped for minute and sighed. “We came too close to a real disaster this time Sam, we have to be better prepared. I think we’ve gotten lazy, relying too much on Jake and Lady Jennie. They won’t always be around to protect us.”

“Haven’t I been saying that all along?” Sam admonished her; “we have to set up a defense by ourselves, Kate. We can’t rely on them all the time!”

“Just between us, Sam, think about who would make the best candidates for riders, male or female.... you know most of the people. I believe that Jake will be going for the eggs as soon as Daniel is ready. Think on it for a few days and then let me know your decision, OK?”

“I appreciate your confidence in me. I can tell you right now that Daniel, Steve and Jerry will be on that list. As to the others, that will take some thinking,” he tilted his head and smiled at her, waving as she went off.

She left the Hall and started her walk around the camp. Everyone was settling in for the night. She thought to herself how they had grown from the four of them to over a hundred fifty people. Sure they had their fights and arguments, but on the whole they were a pretty solid group of people. Jake had spoken of making more riders when they were a larger community, that they would be needed in the future. He seemed to be waiting for something.

I’m positive that Daniel is the key somehow. Jake has been waiting for Daniel to arrive before he begins his so-called ‘task’. Damn his ability to ‘see’ future events.

But, in the long run, she trusted him more than anyone. Now this business with Daniel getting hurt, she liked him a lot; he was kind to Sally, plus he had a good head on his shoulders.

And what a set of shoulders! Damn it, she had to stop this kind of thinking; it was those damn dreams! Secretly, she had to admit that she had entertained some pretty lusty thoughts about him.

She stopped back at the hall and picked up the soup and tea and headed up the mountain. She met Michael coming down.

“Everything’s fine in the surrounding area. No signs of anything or anyone. Lady Jennie couldn’t pick up anything on the ground. If there are more of them, they’ve gone to ground,” he smiled at her, “but she did say that she has a line on a possible hatching ground. Say, you look beat, you need to rest too you know!”

“I’m headed back up there now. I’m going to check on him, and then get myself some sleep, don’t worry yourself about me.” She gave him a quick hug, “hatching ground? Do you really think it will pan out this time? We really need more riders.”

“I think so. Lady Jennie said it was a new one,” he hugged her back and turned and made his way down the mountain, “keep your fingers crossed!”

She quietly entered the cave, dropped the food off on a dresser, and checked Daniel. He was sleeping soundly, his breath was regular and his pulse was almost normal. She grabbed her leather coat and headed for the top of the mountain.

Ah, my Lady.” Jake greeted her as she stepped out into the open.

Jake, my sweet friend. She strode up to him and placed her hand on his huge head, stroking the ridges along side his nose, she sighed. She could never quite get over how big he was, how magnificent he looked. *Thank you for watching over us all.*

It was nothing. You are all my family. Besides, Daniel is to be the rider of my Queen. Jake always saw things in the simplest form. There was no subterfuge with him.

You know when he wakes you will have to tell him everything. Jake continued, *He will not rest till he knows it all, and I for one think that he will understand. He has a strong moral character; and I believe he is smitten with you! Of course it could be because he has the dreams!*

Oh Jake! Be serious! I plan on telling him and I also plan on letting him meet you when he is in his own mind again. I am sure he will have a lot of questions for you. Just don't scare him, let him get used to you first before you show him your full range of strength.

I know how to conduct myself madam. His mind is a strong one, and there are many things in there that I came across that could be of benefit to the community. He will be able to offer us ideas for better protection of the valley. Jake raised his head as if listening to someone. *Ah, he stirs! You had better get down there before he wakes fully.*

See you later Jake. Listen in if you want, but don't let him know you're there, he's going to have to slowly get used to the idea. She gave Jake a hug and turned and made her way down the path to her cave.

It was very quiet when she entered. Daniel was moving his legs and he raised his right arm a bit and flinched and dropped it to his side. The wound was still sore, and would be tender for quite some time. He drifted back to sleep and the woman curled up on the bed and was soon asleep as well. She woke early the next morning and quickly went to her dressing room and washed and changed. As she was coming back to check on him she could see he was waking also.

Daniel opened his eyes and looked around. He couldn't see her standing there as she was behind him to the side. He checked his body, to see where he was injured. He raised the covers, and was surprised that his clothes had been removed. He tried to raise himself, but he was still too weak. He slowly looked around the cave, taking in everything.

This is some place, a sitting area with leather furniture, rugs on the floor. Things get more and more interesting. Somebody's here, I can feel it.

“Is anybody here?” He whispered, as his throat was dry. “Hello?”

“I'm here Daniel.” She kept her voice low and slowly came around the bed to his left side and sat down. Her face was beautiful; concern showed as she asked, “How are you feeling?”

“I feel like a grizzly stomped me good,” he said with a sheepish grin. He looked at her and for the first time he noticed the real concern on her face. “Really, dear lady, I hurt all over, and my head is about to burst, but other than that I’m ok. Is Sally alright?”

**“Yes Daniel, she’s fine, very worried about you, but fine. You saved her life.”
She smiled and Daniel felt his heart leap.**

“If you hadn’t taken such quick action, she wouldn’t be here right now.”

“Was it all real, or was I hallucinating?” he asked her.

“It was real Daniel.” She said as she handed him two aspirin and a glass of water. She helped him sit up and he took the pills and swallowed the water quickly. She propped up two pillows behind him and he winced once as he tried to settle himself.

“And there really is a, a dragon?” He watched her intently for her answer.

“Yes Daniel.” *Those eyes of his are boring right thru me.*

“And he spoke to me in my head, in my mind?”

“Yes Daniel.” She said gently.

“And just when were you going to tell me about him?” He raised his voice in question.

“As a matter of fact, we were going to tell you in a couple of days. That’s why Michael came to you last night; we were going to introduce you to Lady Jennie, Michaels’ companion, first. Depending on your reaction...”

“There’s another one? ... gawgh...cough.” Daniel coughed in surprise.

“Yes Daniel, and depending on your reaction to that shocker, we would have proceeded with a meeting with Jake.”

Daniel stared at her open-mouthed, eyes wide in surprise.

“I brought you some soup, no arguments. If you had any solid food right now you would just toss it. I’ll brew up a pot of tea; it will help settle your stomach. Then we’ll try some soup.”

“So, just how many of you have these, these ‘companions’?” Daniel was incredulous.

“Just Michael and me... for now.” She was busy pouring soup into a large mug. The tea was seeping in the pot, and she placed all of this on a tray and carried it over to the bed. “I wasn’t trying to be sneaky Daniel, but I have a community of people to think about. I couldn’t risk vital information getting into the wrong hands. I didn’t know you from Adam, I had to be sure.”

“Maybe if you didn’t run away from me every time I tried to talk to you, you would have known me better,” he said tartly, regretting it right away. “I’m sorry, that was uncalled for.”

**She grit her teeth knowing he was right, "Don't be, it's the truth."
Daniel was surprised at her honesty.**

She placed the tray on the bed near Daniel and then went around to the right side and helped him to a sitting position, propping him up with some more pillows. She went back around the bed and placed the tray over Daniel's lap. Slowly he reached for and lifted the mug of soup to his mouth and took a sip.

"Hmm.... this is good, pardon me if I get messy. You know," he said after a long breath, "it's taking all my efforts just to lift this mug to my mouth. I can't believe I lost so much of my strength."

"It's the poison; it has that effect on the human body. You're lucky we got you to Jake in time. Even he was worried that he wouldn't be able to burn out all of the poison in time." She leaned forward and gently took the mug from Daniel, "do you want me to help you?"

"You won't think any less of me?" He joked with her, but she noted he looked bushed already.

She laughed and moved closer to him. She took the mug of soup and held it close to his mouth, like a mother does with a small child. It was all done very matter-of-fact-like. He took a sip and leaned back.

"I have this particular image of Jake standing over me burned into my skull. On one hand its mind blowing; and unbelievably noble on the other." His breathing was getting heavy now, "I want to tell him thanks, and have a long talk, and ask him so many questions..."

"Whoa! Slow down a bit! There will be plenty of time for that later. Right now you need to concentrate on rest and getting back your strength. This is very tricky to deal with. You can be fine one minute, and suddenly the bottom drops out." She looked at the empty mug, "well, you certainly finished that quickly. Would you care for another?"

"Yes, please, it's very good," he quickly replied and then leaned back and closed his eyes for a moment. "I am generally ready for everything; but this... I didn't dream any of this. It came out of nowhere." He looked up at the woman, "I'm sorry, I'm babbling like an idiot."

She watched him intently. "No, no you're not; I understand exactly what you mean. Just rest and get your strength back Daniel, the rest will fall into place."

Lord those eyes of his! Concentrate silly girl, concentrate.

She finished pouring more soup into the mug and returned to his side. "Here you go Daniel; there, take it slow and easy." He drank it down greedily.

"Will you tell me all about him? How did you two meet?" He was staring at her to see her reaction. For a split second there was a pained look on her face, and then she covered it over and looked him straight in the eye.

"Well, it's a rather long tale; do you want to rest awhile first?" Her voice was soft and soothing, he felt himself begin to slide. She was patting his leg, "I promise I won't leave, and when you wake I'll tell you everything."

Daniel shook his head, "you may be right; I'm getting really tired all of a sudden." He leaned back against the pillow as a sigh escaped his lips... *ah, so soft, so comfortable*, he felt himself slide into a soft darkness.

She sat there and watched for several minutes until he drifted into a deep sleep. She knew he would do this for the next day or so. Wake and be real alert for about an hour or so, and then tire quickly and fall asleep. The poison from the beast affected the body and spirit strongly. It attacked the body viciously and without let up. It took every ounce of strength that the body had to keep it at bay. When the fever finally breaks, the body's reserves are so depleted that a lot of rest is required to build those reserves back up.

She also knew that during this time he would be susceptible to infections. He had to be watched carefully and isolated from everyone else. She decided to take him to the 'town', there he would be safe, there would be no one around and he could regain his strength faster.

Jake, he's asleep again. He should sleep soundly for the next couple of hours. I'd like to get him to the town as soon as possible. I don't want him to catch anything in his weakened state. She waited a moment and then continued, He is very inquisitive, and I don't think it will be long before I 'fill him in on everything'.

Do not worry yourself My Lady, I have already taken the liberty of getting Michael to bring out one of the trailers, and I have lifted it to the ridge. We have made a comfortable pallet inside and Steve and Big John will carry him to it. You wish to take him to your house, correct? Jake already knew her answer.

Yes, he will be comfortable there. It's a great place to just relax, and forget about everything else in the world. She chuckled for a moment. And you can spend a couple of days sunning yourself and eating. I know you've been thinking about those sides of beef in the meat warehouse ... don't deny it!

I deny nothing!

You will also want to be close by after he and I have that 'talk'. I imagine he will have a lot of questions for you. He kept saying that he didn't dream all of this; so I guess that proves that he does have the dreams, and he does act on them. He seems very perceptive, and I believe that you are right; he will be able to see the truth in all of this craziness. Ah, here are the guys. We'll be up shortly.

Big John, Michael, and Steve came into the cave. Steve handed her a small duffel bag. "I packed some of his stuff in there. I figured he would feel easier with his own stuff around. Michael says I get to fly with you guys. I really am looking forward to that!"

"Kate, is he doing ok?" Big John asked her. She nodded as he and Steve picked up Daniel and gently placed him on the stretcher. She covered him with a comforter. Grabbing what she needed, they began the climb to the ridge top.

"By the way Steve," she said in a teasing voice, "you'll get a ride back with Michael and Lady Jennie."

"Yeah Steve," Michael jumped in, "Lady Jennie says she would be delighted to take you back to camp. She really likes you; I think it's all those compliments you keep giving her!"

They reached the top as the sun was rising to greet the day and sure enough the big trailer that they used for supply runs was on the mesa. Inside were Sam and Lucy. They helped settle Daniel on the pallet.

"Might as well make a run while we're at it," said Sam, "we can always use some beef on the table. And Lucy says she needed some things also."

“Good idea Sam.” She smiled at him.

Jake roared and spread his wings. *Is everyone ready? I would really like to get going.*

***Just about Jake. I will be there in a moment.* She looked at the people in the trailer, “Jake wants to get going. Get yourselves settled, you know the drill.”**

Kate climbed on Jake’s wing and made her way to the sixth ridge and Steve followed her and settled himself behind her. Jake stretched out his massive wings and took off with a leap. He circled around and then lined up on the trailer.

Steve was in heaven; he had a birds-eye view of the whole thing. He squeezed Kate around the waist in his excitement. “... oops, sorry!” She just laughed at his boyish excitement.

They had welded a large bar on the top of the trailer, in the shape of a ‘T’. It was a perfect device for Jake to grab; and it also made it easier to get supplies from the distribution center once a month. He flew in a wide arc and came up behind the trailer with his massive claws extended. He picked up the trailer effortlessly and glided off the mountain, towards the west. The trip took them less than 25 minutes.

As they came over the last mountaintop, Kate could see Michael lazily circling the small hill where the house was located. Jake, anticipating that this would be needed, had sent Michael earlier that morning to turn on the electricity, and to open the windows to air out the house. There was nothing running for cover, everything was quiet, and the house looked just like any other ordinary estate home on a hill. A week here would be all right, any longer and their safety could not be guaranteed. Jake was a great guardian, but even he had to admit that some things could get by him.

Jake set the trailer down in the street next to the house. They opened the doors and quickly got Daniel on the stretcher and into the huge house. Kate had them carry Daniel upstairs to the guest bedroom. She quickly made the bed and they placed him in it. Then she went downstairs with them and out to the trailer.

“I’ll come with you to the center. I’m going to have to get some food in there,” she told them.

Michael circled around and landed. He had two huge pouches on each side of Lady Jennie, who had a very smug look on her face. He got down and reached up and opened the pouches. Out popped a massive head, it was Tabs, and on the other side was Ash! They jumped down and started barking, tails wagging, and running around the two dragons. They were very excited; they had finally gotten to ride with Michael and Lady Jennie. Michael bent down and both dogs immediately came to him; he whispered something to both of them and stood up. They gave a quick yip, and both ran off to the house. They covered the porch in one leap and then they were in the house. Michael looked at Kate and smiled. She knew that he had sent the dogs to stay with Daniel while she was gone. She smiled a ‘thank-you’ to him. He just shrugged his shoulders and tilted his head and smiled.

Jake lifted them off and set them down at the food distribution center in less than two minutes. He then flew to the top of a building and spread himself out to sunbathe till they were ready to go.

The rest of the group went inside the huge warehouse. Sam and Lucy quickly got busy getting food supplies for the community. Kate went to the other warehouse first. She needed to get some clothes for Daniel, and she dragged Steve along with her, for sizing purposes. It would make it easier to pick out some things he’d wear with one of his men with her. They picked up jeans, tee shirts, some underwear, and a pair of pajamas.

When he was better he could get his own clothes. She also picked up some things for herself. She boxed them up and had Steve take them out to the trailer, and then set out for the food warehouse. She picked up what she thought he might like. She got some steak, and some canned goods, and juice. It would take a while for some of this to thaw, so she also picked up a couple of frozen dinners. She got cokes, tea, and bottled water and beer. She wheeled her items to a side entrance and quickly boxed it all up and placed it in the trailer.

She went and found the others. “Sam, I’m going to have Jake take me to the house. I don’t want to leave him too long; just in case of a relapse, you know. I’ll send Jake back to take you guys home when you’re done. I’ll see you in a week or so.” She waved good-bye and headed for the trailer.

Jake took her back to the house. *You should be ok here. I do not see anything in the immediate area. If you need me, just call.*

She went inside and she quickly unpacked the boxes, checked on Daniel, who was still asleep, then went back downstairs to the kitchen and got busy preparing some dishes. She knew that he would awaken well, but ravenous. She made a small potato salad for herself; she put some chicken in to marinade overnight; then she made a Jell-O mold. She took some bread out of the freezer to thaw. Thinking that he might wake up one more time, she put a small pot of chicken soup on to warm up.

Feeling hungry she made a sandwich and grabbed a diet coke, which she poured over some ice. She took the whole thing outside and ate on the screened-in back porch. A light breeze blew thru the area and she sighed deeply and leaned back. The ‘twins’ came downstairs bounding thru the kitchen and out onto the porch. They both sat and looked up at her.

“And just what do you two want? You guys need to go; want to explore for a bit?” Both perked up and tails wagged vigorously. She got up and opened the screen door, “go ahead, have some fun.”

They took off like a shot across the lawn. There wasn’t much of a chance that they would get into any trouble. She settled back and took a long sip of the now ice-cold coke. She thought about all that had recently happened, and about what she would say to him. If he was to become what Jake saw, then he needed to know the whole truth, lock, stock, and barrel. She just wondered if the dreams got it right about him.

She rose and went back into the house. God, how she loved this house! The hardwood floors, the airy openness in all the rooms. Not a lot of bric-a-brac around; just strong clear lines, minimal and yet warm. Windows stretched to the ceilings, with shutters on the outside. There was a small scattering of throw rugs around. The stairway to the second floor was of light ash wood, as was all the wood in the house, the moldings, the window trim, and the doors. The whole house gave one a sense of warmth, and beauty. The bedrooms were done in the same way, all eight of them. The master bedroom was in the back of the house; it received the rising sun in the mornings. [She loved that most of all!] It also had the largest walk-in closet she had ever seen. The bathroom had a sunken tub, and also a shower stall with a seat built into it.... all done in Italian marble. Whoever had built this house knew exactly what they wanted.

And the kitchen...ah, it was a wonder! It was obvious that the previous owner was a lover of good food. The kitchen had every device known to man. A rather large freezer had a small room all to itself. The refrigerator was one of those steel two-door types. There was an island to work on complete with its own sink and garbage disposal. Encircling the island was a shelf area inlaid with white tile, complete with bar chairs. She could almost imagine a group of people standing at the bar chatting, some leaning over, as she prepared appetizers and drinks.

Ah, another time and another world.

She busied herself the rest of the day by wiping down the counters, and then mopped the kitchen floor. She dusted the tables and shelves, and dust mopped the rest of the floors. She aired out most of the house before it got dark. She went to the garden in the backyard and cut some Hydrangea and put them in vases and set them throughout the house. She set candles and pots of potpourri about upstairs to put some scent into the air. She called for the twins, but they didn’t answer. She looked off into the distance and saw some clouds heading her way.

She checked on Daniel twice, watching him as he slept for a while.

The 'twins' came back with dirty feet and burrs in their fur. After combing and brushing the burrs out, she decided to bathe them. (They were not as appreciative as she thought they should be.) She fed them and herself dinner; then went for a walk before turning in for the night.

She felt relaxed and at ease with herself. She hadn't realized how long it had been since she had had any downtime. She headed back to the house after about an hour. The 'twins' had done their business and were ready to settle down for the night. As she opened the back door, they went charging inside, rounded the corner sliding on the floor. They slammed into the staircase, recovered, and bounded up the stairs. If that didn't wake him, nothing would.

She changed for the night, went downstairs and got a book from the library. She then went around the house and closed all the windows and pulled down the blackout curtains. She settled herself into bed and read for a while. Her eyes were heavy and she realized she was very tired. She turned off the light, rolled over, curled up and went to sleep.

During the night a storm passed thru. Lightening and thunder woke her. She sat up for a bit watching the display across the night sky. At a flash of lightening the room lit up and suddenly Daniel was standing there. She almost jumped out of her skin. When she went up to him she realized that he was still asleep. Careful not wake him, she led him back to his bed and tucked him in. He slept thru the whole thing.

Kate returned to her room and watched the storm for a while. *Winter is definitely on its way, she thought. We only get these kind of storms just before winter sets into the mountains. And it looks like it's going to be a dilly this year.*

On the morning of the third day at the house Daniel awoke to the sounds of birds chirping outside his open window. He lay there for a moment listening as he oriented himself to his surroundings. *Am I really awake this time?* He lay there enjoying the sounds. *It's been so long since I heard a bird sing. This is so surreal.* Suddenly his nose was aware of the aroma that was filling the room. *That's coffee!*

Slowly he raised himself up to a sitting position; he was sore, but he would live. He checked himself over; he was naked, *I wonder if she removed my clothes?* He looked around the room. *This is not a dream; this is real, I am awake this time. But-where the hell am I? First I was in a cave, and now I'm in a house with birds singing!* Just then Ash and Tabs popped up beside the bed.

“Hey guys,” he said in a scratchy voice as he rubbed Ash’s’ massive head, “hey there big boy.” Tabs nudged his head in for a scratching also; tails were wagging and thumping the floor. Daniel asked, “Can you go get someone, please!”

They took off bounding out the door sliding across the hall rug to the stairs. *They should have been called Frick & Frack,* he thought with a smile.

Geez I've got to pee!

Daniel slowly swung his legs over the side of the bed and tried to raise himself up to a standing position.

Whoa, still a little woozy.

As he stood by the bed he noticed a pile of clothing stacked up on the nearby chair. It was slow going, but he managed to get to the bathroom. He hardly recognized himself in the mirror. His hair was in disarray, his eyes were sunken in, his face was ashen, and he looked haggard. He checked his shoulder and chest. The bandage was easy to remove. It was nearly healed already, but there would be a nasty scar. He knew he was lucky to be alive. He finished his business and washed up. He noticed his ditty bag was on the counter with all his toiletries. He brushed his teeth and gargled; then combed his hair and tied it back.

There, much better buddy, now you look human again.

He came out of the bathroom and grabbed the clothes and went thru them. He took some jeans and a shirt and some underwear and got dressed. The woman walked into the room just as he was zipping up his jeans. He turned quickly and was hit with a dizzy spell and his step faltered. She quickly came to his side and slid her arm around his waist and helped him to the bed.

“Thanks,” he whispered in a raspy voice. “Say, I’m really thirsty.”

“Good, how about some orange juice to start?” She tilted her head to the side and smiled.

“Oh yeah, that would be great!” He responded with a smile as he sat on the side of the bed.

She went into the hall and came back with a bed tray. It had a bottle of Tylenol and a large orange juice on it.

“When the dogs came down all excited I figured that you were awake. I brought the Tylenol because I knew that your head would be pounding by now,” she said as she handed him two pills and the glass of OJ. “How do you take your coffee; black or with cream?”

“Thanks, I can use these,” he took them from her and swallowed them down with a large gulp of orange juice. “Black and sweet; man this is great! It’s been a long time since I had orange juice.”

“The calcium in the OJ will help in your healing. We don’t have much of it left, so we save it for just such an occasion. You look a lot better than you did 2 days ago.” She smiled at him, “So, think you could eat something?”

“I’m so hungry woman, I could eat a bear,” he said with a devilish grin.

She smiled catching his drift right away, “would you like to eat in bed, or do you think you could make it downstairs? I can help you down if you would like.” She watched him to see his reaction.

He thought for a moment, and then slowly stood. “I’ve had enough of bed! I would like to try to go downstairs, but I have a feeling that I’m a lot weaker than I think. So if you really don’t mind, I’d like to take you up on that offer of help.”

He walked slowly around the bed and headed towards the doorway. She went into the closet and came out with a large wooden cane. The handle had a carved silver wolfs head on it. She placed it in his left hand and he was immediately grateful. It helped to take the strain off his right side.

As he entered the hallway he took in his surroundings. He could see that there were at least four other bedrooms on this floor. Hers (the master?) seemed to be at the end of the hallway, towards the back of the house he thought. The floors were wood, shined to a mirror image. There was a long throw rug down the center leading to the top of the stairway. She came over and slid her arm around his waist, and ducked under his right arm so he could lean on her. Going down the stairs was slow and a bit tricky, but he made it.

Ceiling to floor windows allowed the sunshine in, and he could see thru the house to the outside. It was a beautiful autumn day, he could feel a bit of a breeze come thru the open windows. As they came to the bottom of the stairs, she steered him towards the back of the house, towards the kitchen entrance. Inside he could smell the coffee, and also something else. There was a vase of Hydrangea on the table, and one on the countertop. It brought back memories of a different time. She helped him towards a chair by the table, but he preferred the bar stool at the counter. He sat down and looked around. She ducked out and was back in a flash with his OJ.

“This is quite a place,” he commented looking around.

She went around the island in the center of the kitchen and asked him, “What’s your pleasure sir, eggs, bacon, sausage, steak, biscuits? Take your pick.” She was getting down a frying pan from several that were hanging on a rack above her head.

He stared at her for a moment, grinned, and then answered, “Yes!”

“Yes? To all of it,” She asked in surprise as he was nodding at her, “alright, it’s your stomach.”

He watched as she went about her chore with the ease of someone who knows where everything is in her kitchen and what to do with it. Soon the entire kitchen was filled with the most wonderful smells. She took 5 eggs and made the biggest batch of scrambled eggs he’d ever seen; then she fried up 6 slices of bacon, 4 large links of sausage, and finally, a small breakfast steak.

She thought to herself, *this had better hold him for a while*. Several times she caught him watching her intently. She set the table, and put butter and jelly out for him, and then took the biscuits out of the oven. She put them in a breadbasket and covered them with a towel, and handed them to him.

“Here, sit yourself down at the table and butter up some biscuits. I’ll have breakfast ready in just a few. And if you don’t mind, pour me a cup of coffee please.” She handed him a cup, and he filled it.

He sat there watching her the whole time sipping his coffee. He was enjoying just watching her cook; it was comforting in a way. It brought back pleasant memories of another time. She finished, put two plates down on the table in front of him, and filled them with all the wonders she had made.

“This looks great! Thank you for making it,” he said as he picked up the fork and dug in with gusto. He relished each bite, enjoyed each forkful of food. She sat across from him and watched as he emptied his plate in 20 minutes.

“God that was good!” He mumbled as he wrapped the last piece of bacon in the last biscuit and popped it into his mouth. “Mmm ... I’ve never been so hungry; and the food never tasted so good. Is it because of the fever?”

“Yes, in part. All your taste buds were alive with anticipation. You see the acid that Jake used to cleanse your wounds was his own saliva. Your body’s reaction to the poison and to the saliva was what caused the fever. Your body had to accept the bacteria in the saliva, and reject the poison. What it comes down to is a battle of wills. It takes a lot out of you and you wake up literally starving. Jake felt that you had a strong constitution, and would survive.”

Daniel tilted his head to one side as if remembering, “Speaking of Jake – my God woman... how do you keep such a secret?” He was looking at her intently with admiration in his eyes.

“He is magnificent! So big, so powerful, so – I’m running out of words to use.”

He was going on and on, finally ending with, “can we talk about him? Are you ready to tell me about him; where did you two meet? How did you meet?”

He rose and reached over the counter and poured himself another cup of coffee. He motioned with the coffee pot asking if she wanted some, she shook her head no.

“He’s an intelligent being, I could see that in his eyes, and I have a feeling a lot more. I’m not going back to sleep this time, I’m all ears.”

She was smiling at his enthusiasm. “Would you like to sit out on the back porch? It’s a lovely morning Daniel, and this will take a little time to tell. You might as well be comfortable,” she said as she headed out the back door.

He followed and found himself on a porch that ran the full length of the house. “This house is amazing, has a nice comfy feel to it,” he told her. The deck was made of oak, and there was an overhang from the house to give shade, it was screened in to keep out mosquitoes. There was comfortable furniture spread about. The view was spectacular.

The whole town was visible from this vantage point. It was small maybe 15 square blocks in all. Of course there was a church, complete with steeple, a town square across from the church, a movie theater, and what looked like a library. There were a number of houses with swings in the backyards. The town was completely self-sufficient; there were solar panels on every roof. They had everything here that anyone would want; of course they had to provide these things in order to get anyone to work all the way out here.

Daniel settled himself down and turned his gaze on this amazing woman. She was totally different from the cold distant ice witch he remembered in camp. She was warmer, more caring. She carried herself with great confidence, like someone on a mission. She really wasn't what you call beautiful, but definitely attractive. She wore her golden hair down, thick and flowing on her back, tied with a blue ribbon. *Nice little touch.* As the sunlight hit her hair, her golden tresses gave off a halo effect. If he had to guess, he'd say she was somewhere in her late thirties.

But Sam had said she was over seventy!

He figured that she stood about 5'6", he was 6'2, and he seemed to tower over her. She had on a blue shirt that draped over her ample breasts, and white Capri pants that framed a firm good-looking ass. She had what he liked to call 'a ripe figure'. He could see that she was trying to put him at ease; he wanted to do the same.

"Are you comfortable Daniel? Do you want anything else to drink? Daniel, are you alright?"

"What, oh yes, yes I'm fine. I was just thinking about something. You know, with what happened to me, I wonder how many more of those 'things' might be out there. We have to do something; find some way to keep them out of the camp."

"Steve is working on that problem as we speak. We can address that later. Do you have any objections to Jake listening in? If you have any questions when I'm done, just direct them to him."

"Just a second," Daniel went inside and returned a minute later with a large glass of water, "I'm really dry and very thirsty. Ok ready, shoot!"

She grinned at him and shook her head. "Ok, I'm going to tell you everything, even the way I felt at the time. Jake says that you must be aware of everything. I don't enjoy part of this, but I am going to tell you anyway; you may or may not understand."

His brow furrowed as he stared at her not understanding.

"Things have changed in the world Daniel, and new rules apply to everything. You will see that for yourself soon enough, if you haven't already. This was a very moving experience for me; so open your mind to other possibilities."

“Most of what I told you when you arrived was true; but I left out a few items. Like we all had these very vivid dreams...all of us! They were all the same to some degree; some of us were riding dragons and fighting other dragons. The dreams were extremely vivid, the noise was deafening. We would wake up at the same time, huffing and puffing, and covered in sweat. We discussed it a lot at first, then after a time we simply accepted them as visions of future events. Always we felt comforted by some unseen force.

“There was one thing that was different from the others, and I kept it to myself. In my dreams - I spoke to my dragon. We were friends, only more. And there was someone flying on my right. It was you Daniel. That’s why when you walked into camp and I got a good look at you, it stopped me in my tracks. I asked Jake about it right away, and all he would say was that ‘... things were coming along nicely...’

“As to my wonderful friend and companion, Jake, we met under different circumstances. I am going to make this quick and clean.” She took a deep breath and continued. “I had left the camp to do some exploring; I guess this was about four years ago. I had decided to go west of the town and look around. I just wanted to see what was out there, and if any more people survived. I was on one of the Arabian horses, no one was in sight; I took a chance. We were galloping along at a pretty fast pace when I came around a curve in the road and ran smack into a band of marauders. I wasn’t prepared at all; I never stood a chance. They were all over me before I could raise any defense. They took the horse, killed it and ate it. They questioned me as to where I came from, and how many there were of us. I made sure they believed that I was alone, just looking for others to join. They tied me up and brought me to their camp; there were no women there at all. They tied me to a stake and then they had a go at me, one and then two at a time. I prefer not to remember anymore of those days than is necessary.” He could see that she was visibly shaking.

He reached over and put his hand on her shoulder, “it’s over woman; they can’t hurt you anymore.”

“Thank you for your understanding Daniel,” she said softly. Then she continued, “They threw me in the back of a wagon they had and began a journey to another camp. I figured they would kill me when they got tired of me. I was so filled with guilt Daniel; I had been so stupid. I had let my guard down.”

“After about three days on the road something happened. As near as I can figure out, they ran smack dab into 2 dragons. One was in the air but the other one was on the ground. I had never heard of that before. Right away these clowns started firing their weapons, and throwing grenades, they even had an RPG. The dragon in the air got really pissed and started to burn the bastards. I have to admit I enjoyed watching them light up. While all this was going on, I slid out of the back of the wagon and into some bushes nearby. I crawled along them and made my way to a rocky area and eventually to a series of rocky caves. I can tell you I took no time getting into one of them. The burning and gunfire went on for a long time; then all was quiet.

Inside the cave I was trying to adjust my eyes to the dark when I heard the dragons outside sniffing at all the caves. They found two of the men hiding in one cave; there was a lot of yelling and screaming. They were coming closer to where I was so I moved towards the back of the cave. I tripped and fell face down in a puddle of what I thought was water. The smell of ammonia told me that it was dragon piss. There was an opening at the rear of the cave and I squeezed into it with all my might. One of the foul creatures stuck its head into the cave and sniffed. I held my breath hoping it would not pick up my scent. It didn’t, thank God! I squeezed thru the opening into another area and turned around to see where this had led me. I froze on the spot, my heart in my mouth.

Laid out before me was a hatching chamber. There were eggs everywhere, in all sizes and shapes. From gelatinous tiny little footballs to hard shelled giants. And the small ones were different colors; deep purple, dark blue, several dark shades of brown. It looked like some of them had been eaten or maybe just smashed for some reason. As my eyes focused better I could see there was a dragon caring for two rather large eggs that seemed to be cracking. Some of the eggshell had fallen near by; it covered the spot where I was. Two little dragons were screeching and hissing loudly. As they emerged the large female dragon looked them over. She screeched at them and they spread their wet little wings and flapped about for a bit. She then reached down for something and came up with one of those men in her mouth. He was still alive, poor bastard; screaming and flaying around like a madman. She threw him to the baby dragons. They tore him to pieces in seconds. Then she took them out thru the large opening at the other end of the cavern.

I was so scared Daniel, I just wanted to get out of there. I started to move and stopped in my tracks, there was another female lying on the ground right in front of me! I hadn't even seen her. She rose up and turned her back to the eggs and raised her butt in the air. She then proceeded to lay about 20 eggs. The smell was disgusting. I had to hold my hand over my mouth to keep from vomiting. She finally finished and bounded out of the cave. When I was sure she was gone and there were no more of them around, I vomited all over the place. I was on my knees throwing up my guts when I heard 'him' for the first time.

It was a little boy's voice that asked... *Hello... is somebody there?*

I don't have to tell you that my heart did a flip. It sounded like a little kid. Oh my God, I thought, a child was trapped in here somewhere. Daniel, his voice was pathetic, so vulnerable. I squatted down close to the ground and tried to look around, I couldn't see anyone, but then I heard him again.

Please? I know you are there, please help me. He pleaded piteously. Don't leave me here!

It was as tho' I was hearing it in my mind. I was looking for him all over the place; I was sure there was a small boy somewhere in the cavern. I swore to myself that I wasn't going to leave him to those monsters. And then I thought to myself...'where the hell are you kid? I can't see you anywhere!'

Just as quickly he answered, *I'm over here*, he was crying. *I can see some light and shadows.*

I'm going to raise my hand, tell me if you can see it. I stood and waved my hand about.

I am not sure, but I think I saw some shadowy movement. Please hurry, they will come back and I do not want to be like them. His little voice told me he was very frightened. *If you do not take me with you I will become one of them. Please... I do not want that to happen.*

He was getting a hysterical pitch in his voice. *Calm down little one, I am not leaving here without you; you got that? I will find you.* I promised him. *Now, exactly where are you? I am on my hands and knees and I'm moving forward to where I think you are. Can you see me yet?* I kept moving forward, all around the eggs. I began to move the egg shells about making a pathway thru the other eggs.

And then he said, *Wait! There is a very large dark shape right above me.*

I looked down and below me was a small gray gelatinous egg, I could see movement inside. As I stared at the small egg, one of the dreams broke and suddenly I remembered everything. This was a dragon meant for me and me alone!

Oh My God! I thought, this is impossible, this can't be happening! This egg can't be talking to me.

Yes, yes I am, he quickly said. Please, you cannot leave me here; you know you are my rider. I dreamt all about you. Remember how we flew together?

This little voice was pleading with me for his life. Sanity said to run away from all of it, and I would have until I heard him say that. I looked at this little thing, wondering. Everything that had happened during the last four years had changed my way of thinking about everything. What if all of it was a preparation for just this moment? I reached down and picked him up and was immediately hit with an electric shock so big it knocked me down. Something passed between us, something so intense, so wonderful... it defied explanation. And then this warm feeling of love engulfed my mind. I can't explain it. That was when I knew!

He spoke to me in my head; Dragons were made to be companions to humans, and to have human riders. If they can't find their rider they go insane. They will fly into a rage and kill everything they find. I do not want that to happen to me. You know I am telling the truth.

Just then I heard one of the females coming back into the cavern. I looked down at him and without really understanding why; I stuffed him under my shirt next to my skin. I remember he was warm against my body. I tied him in and closed my jacket and zipped it up. I squeezed back thru the opening and I ran, and ran. When we got outside it was dark, a very dangerous time to be traveling with dragons in the area. I had to find some shelter.

And then he was directing me out of harms way. Ease your way around to the right side of this mountain. There will be a large boulder there and you can slide behind it into a ditch. His voice now took on an authoritative tone. The ditch will lead you to a culvert. We can rest there till dawn. They can't see too well at sunrise and it will buy us time to get away. We will have a chance to follow the ditch for a few miles and by then we will be safe.

I did as he suggested and by God he was right! There was a boulder and the ditch beneath it. I slipped thru the opening and dropped into the ditch. I hugged the ground and slowly made my way to the culvert. Once there we settled in and waited for dawn.

Thank you; thank you so much for saving me. He was so grateful and happy to be free of the cave and most certain death. You are so kind.

Shh...hush...there, there. Stop crying, it's all right now. I was actually patting the little egg and stroking it to calm him. You're going to be fine; I won't let them get you. I don't know what we are going to do with you, but we'll work it out. Right now we have to be very quiet.

We stayed there not moving a muscle till dawn. Believe it or not I had the best rest during those hours. I awoke feeling full of energy, and ready to get going. It began to get lighter and I could see the sun was beginning to climb over the mountaintop.

Now! He urged me, we must move quickly along the ditch. They will not be looking in this direction for the sunrise will blind them. We have to hurry and cover as much distance as possible.

I took off running as fast as my legs would carry me. *You know you suddenly seem to know an awful lot about the lay of the land around here, I told him.*

"He chuckled," she looked at Daniel and smiled at the memory, "he actually chuckled."

Dragons are born with all knowledge; they can call upon that knowledge when they require it. They lose it when they fail to find a rider, and go mad instead. Somehow, over the centuries, man has lost the knowledge of what to do.

I thought for a moment and then asked, so their re-emergence in the world, and the dreams people are having, one way or another this is all part of some plan? To remind the human race that once, long ago, they worked together as a team!

I do not know all the whys of this, not yet at least. All I know for now is that we have been called again to serve and protect. I think we can relax now; it appears that we are out of their range. I believe there is a ranch house a few miles from here. You must bathe and change your clothing, you smell like one of them. The 'Twins' will never let you get close to your camp if you smell like dragon!

He startled me when he said that, so you know of the Twins?

His voice chuckled and took on a whimsical tone, Of course! Michael will go and get his own egg four days after you arrive back and tell him of me. His will be a female; he will also tell you that the chamber was smashed to bits. He will become a great force in the battle against the Insane Ones. And there will be others too! But for now we must get you back, and I must grow so that I can hatch and we can finally meet. Oh I am so tired. It felt like he was yawning, May I sleep for a while My Lady?

Of course little one, rest and sleep. I continued along the path, I have plenty to go over in my mind; and I would like to be alone to do that if you have no objections?

He was asleep; I could feel it. I remember thinking that this put everything on a new level. Telling the others was going to be difficult. It felt ok to me, mind you, but the others would take some convincing. Maybe they would have dreamt all this, I thought, and an explanation wouldn't be necessary. I kept going till I found the ranch house the little guy had spoke about. There was no one around. I went inside and laid him on the bed in the master bedroom, and proceeded to strip off all my clothes. I took a shower to end all showers. I scrubbed my body like crazy; I wanted to wash more than dragon piss off of me.

I found clothing in what was once a teenage girl's room; jeans, t-shirt, undies, socks & sneakers. There was even a real nice leather jacket in her closet. I pulled the sheet off the twin size bed, ripped it in half and made a sort of sling. I placed it over my head and right shoulder and made a pouch inside it where I gently slipped the egg. I said a silent prayer for the teenager and her family, and we left that place.

We began our journey back home. I kept the heading east northeast. I remembered that we were on roads the whole time I was in that van. So I had a pretty good idea of how to backtrack and get home. Plus I'm sure that the little guy would be able to tell if I was off track. He slept the rest of the day, and began to stir close to sundown. We traveled the rest of the night and into the next day. Then far into the distance I could see the outline of the misty mountains. It was a wonderful sight - my mountains! I quickened my pace and made it to the town by nightfall. I knew I would be able to rest here safely and find some food and drink. That's when I went into this house for the first time. He told me I could sleep here as long as I wanted, that this was my house. Michael would find me here in two days. He had given him a dream so he would know I was safe and also where to find me.

Sure enough two days later I watched as Michael and Sam came out of the woods with the 'twins' and made straight for the house. There was a lot of hugging, and a lot of 'I missed-you', and 'I-never-gave-up-hope'. It was wonderful to see them again.

“Lord woman, ‘till Michael had that dream night before last we weren’t sure you were alive.” Sam was excited, “what happened to you, where were you?”

I told them what happened. How I protected the camp and told them nothing. And then I told them about the cave and finding the little guy. Sam took longer to convince than Michael. Michael believed me right away, and he asked to see the egg. I took them both upstairs and showed it to them. Sam wanted to destroy it right away.

“Ya can’t trust them, do you know what you’re doing girl!” There was panic in his voice.

“Not all of them are like that, not all of them are killers,” I told him. Then I asked him if he would believe me if he could hear the little guy. He said that I was in shock because of what I had been thru; that I had imagined all of it.

I asked the little guy to say something to Sam. He told me he couldn’t, not without Sam’s permission. That seemed to carry some weight with Sam, so he gave it.

You don’t have to be afraid of me Sam; I would not harm you or Lucy. Sam’s eyes flew wide open and he was white as a ghost. I am here to protect you all. And together we will save this world of ours.

For a moment I thought that Sam was going to faint.
“My God,” exclaimed Sam, “what is to become of us?”

Michael answered him immediately, “We’re going to be just fine Sam. We’re going to fight back. We’re gonna kick ass and take names; about damn time!” Sam and I looked at each other and burst out laughing.

I told them what I had learned from the little guy. I told them that I was going to follow his instructions and I was going to hatch him. I trusted him; when I decided that I don’t exactly know. I just knew it was true. We headed back to the camp, and on the way I saw the caves in the upper part of the mountain. I told them that I would take him there, and I would keep him away from the others till I was sure they wouldn’t harm him. We agreed that we wouldn’t say anything to the others about him just yet. So, I made my place in the upper caves and settled there with him. He was with me all the time, hidden under my coat while I worked in the fields. It was getting close to winter and it was cool out so wearing my coat was no problem for the time being. We even slept together at night. But about a month and a half later he was too big for me to carry around any more. I had to leave him in the cave during the day. But we kept in touch telepathically. His shell hardened and then he really started to grow in size.

Sure enough, four days after we returned Michael went and got his own egg. He told me that he found the chamber all but destroyed. He found his egg quite by accident. He literally tripped and fell on her. She was so weak that he wouldn’t have heard her had he not been right on top of her. He was very excited about it. He loved the idea that he had a friend he could talk to, and who accepted him for himself. He followed my instructions, and even got some of his own.

During all this time my little guy was very busy. Everyone was having dreams about riding dragons. And they all felt good about it. Each persons dream was different, engineered for just them, but they all had the same effect. I realized what he was doing; paving the way for when I told them about him. I began to think that for such a little thing, he was very powerful. I began to pray for guidance as to how to handle all this and what to do. Was he good? Was he an agent of the devil? All kinds of thoughts came and went in my mind. Finally I decided to just ask him outright about all that had happened; and about how God fit into all of this; and the thoughts that I had.

She looked at Daniel and said in a soft voice, “this is what he told me, Daniel: *It is not for us to guess what the Creator has in mind for man. We only follow His instructions in all things. We were called here to protect and serve once again; and so we shall.*

That settled the matter for me. I asked a lot of questions and learned a lot about the origins of the dragons. Ages ago man and dragon were a team on this planet. Who do you think kept the dinosaurs at bay? They protected us and cared for us. The farmers would pay them in a portion of their crops at harvest time each year. There would be a large feast, and all the dragon riders would come and mingle with the people. Then there was some kind of a terrible cataclysm. The human race had to start all over again. The knowledge of dragons died out, but their legend lived on in folklore. Any hatching ground that survived would have gone into hibernation till the time was right again. Someone stumbling about would accidentally start the process again. That’s all it would take, one touch. It seems that the touch of a human will bring the egg awake. And then the dragon searches for his telepathic link. If he can’t find it, well, you know the rest.

Five months went by and everything seemed to be going well. The egg was huge, about 20 feet tall as near as I could figure. My guy said it was getting very cramped inside and it wouldn’t be too much longer before he would hatch. I noticed that his ‘voice’ had changed. It sounded older, more mature. Sam wanted to be at the hatching in case anything went wrong. He was worried that the little guy would eat me. You know, that thought never entered my mind. He was my friend, I trusted him.

And then one day while I was working in the fields he called out to me. He told me I should hurry and come to the cave. It was time, and I must be the first thing he sees when he emerges. I didn’t tell Sam, I just casually left and headed towards the cave. I was very excited, and a little scared all at the same time.

When I entered the cave I could see parts of the shell lying on the ground. It was very dark and I had to let my eyes adjust. I called out to him with my mind and asked if he was all right, if he needed my help. Then I heard him chuckling behind me. I spun around, and as my eyes adjusted to the dimly lit cave I saw an awesome sight. Oh God Daniel, the human mind is just not prepared for such a sight.

Before me stood the most magnificent creature you could imagine. A huge dragon, he was 23 feet at least. He was the blackest-black you can imagine, all glistening in the light. Except for his head, it was a lighter shade of black, and the front of it had some silver and purple on the ridges around his eyes and along side his nose. His eyes - oh my, they were two of biggest, blackest eyes I have ever seen - swimming in a sea of gold. And they were intelligent eyes, totally aware! We stood there facing each other, eyes locked for I don’t know how long.

Good God! I thought to myself, you... you are magnificent!

Something passed between us so strong, you could almost touch it. It was like a beam of energy that went from his head and heart to mine. I could feel myself rising up in the air. He wrapped his massive wings around me. My mind was suddenly flooded with images of all kinds; I was suddenly aware, Daniel, totally aware. Everything made sense. That’s when I saw you for the first time. After a bit, he gently placed me back on the ground. He stood his full height and threw his head back and up, and then he bent forward spreading his wings and laying his massive head close to the ground at my feet, as though he were kneeling.

I am the First of the Ancients – Jake – the Healer. We have returned to man; we are here to serve and protect. You were chosen for me, and I for you. You are my companion, my rider and my friend. We will return the world to peace again. Together, My Lady, we shall prevail.

My whole body was shaking; I was so overcome with emotion, tears were streaming down my face. I bent down and stroked the ridges around his eyes. I was crying and smiling all at the same time telling him; *you are so magnificent! I can feel so much love coming from you... love...real love.* I was bursting with happiness. *Oh Jake, whatever fate has in store for us, we will face it together.*

I can't explain the feeling of knowing this wonderful living creature. It is so personal, so intense. I don't think there are words to describe it. He would never judge me, he would always accept me, and he would never betray me. I could trust him completely!

Daniel was very moved as he watched her relaying all this. Tears streamed down her face at the memory of this momentous occasion.

You are most beautiful, My Lady, as I knew you would be. He told me in a voice of absolute love. *And you shall become even more beautiful when we take our first ride together and the enhancement takes place.*

What do you mean Jake? What enhancement? I was curious about this statement.

Have you not looked into the mirror since our return, have you not seen the changes slowly taking place. You have lost your aged appearance. Your hair is no longer silver and gold. Your face no longer has those lines on it; and your body has regained the vitality of youth. One of the benefits of Dragon & Rider is that the aging process slows. Each rider and dragon is enhanced to his or her full potential. It is the one gift we can bestow on each other. I believe that Michael will be the one that all the others will notice right away. For he is a child of ten years now and when he rides for the first time; he will return a man. That is enough for now my friend, we shall talk more later. Then he stretched his wings; *oh I believe this room is too small for me. I shall go to the top of this mountain and stretch my cramped legs and wings. There is a pathway leading to the top from inside this cave. Go towards the back and you will see it. I shall meet you up there.*

He went to entrance of the cave and extending his wings he took to the air. I stood there for a moment and then turned and went towards the back of the cave as Jake instructed. I was following the pathway up to the top of the mountain, and thinking of how I could provide food for Jake, we didn't have much in the size he would require. When I reached the top he was waiting for me.

I shall provide my own food My Lady, do not worry. There is a herd of deer and moose about forty minutes flying time to the north. I shall indulge my hunger there, and return in several days.

With that he spread his massive wings and leapt into the air and he was gone in a matter of minutes. My God what a sight! I stood there for a long time watching him fly off. I was so overcome that it took me awhile to get control of myself again.

I went down the pathway to the cave and just sat there for a time. There was so much to think about. I remembered what he said, so I went to my things and rummaged around looking for a mirror. I found a small compact and opened it and took a look at myself. I mean really looked. Where was the old lady? I looked like I did when I was in my forties... amazing! I could only see a bit at a time, the mirror was so small. I secretly wanted a full-length mirror to inspect my body. Apparently the change had taken place gradually over the last 4 months, so no one really noticed. My hair had become full and luxurious again, and I noticed that I didn't really need my glasses any more. My breasts were firm again, and my butt seemed to be 'perky' again.

Whoa, this was great I thought to myself! I couldn't even imagine what the change would be like when we flew for the first time. I pulled myself together and got ready to go down to the Hall and tell Sam what happened. Michael... I had to tell Michael first.

Michael met me on the pathway and told me that thru his dragon he was aware that Jake had hatched. Then he told me I looked great. So much younger, it was amazing. He was looking forward to his dragon hatching soon also. He was so excited for me and for the possibilities for himself.

I went down to the meeting hall and pulled Sam aside and told him what had happened. "Have you looked at yourself lately girl? My God, you're younger than me now! You look wonderful!" He was grateful that I was still alive. I told him that I had to tell the others. There was no way we could hide the fact that a dragon was in the area, and I didn't want them firing on Jake. Sam still thought that everything was happening too fast. He was always on his guard. He was just worried about all of us. Jake would soon put his mind to rest.

Later that night at dinner, I called them to attention and told them what I had done, and how long it had been going on, and that Jake had hatched. There was stunned silence. Then all kinds of questions were flying at me. I answered as best I could. In the end, they seemed to accept it. Most were saying that their dreams had prepared them for this situation. They believed it was a sign of things to come.

A few weeks later, we were all in the fields harvesting the corn crop before winter set in. All of a sudden the first of those terrible 'things' came charging out of the brush. It was growling and slobbering something awful. It lunged at several of us. We all started screaming and shouting; and we ran for our lives. The damn thing came charging after us. My mind was racing as to what we could do, where had I put the rifles. Out of the sky as fast as a lightning strike, there was a black blur and the thing was gone. We looked around stunned; what had just happened? Where was the thing?

I have taken care of the problem My Lady. Jake was calling to me, that foul creature will no longer frighten or hurt anyone. You are all my family and I would not let that thing harm any of you.

I told everyone what had just happened. I told them what Jake had said about their being 'family'. You can imagine the result. From then on they accepted Jake as our protector. When Lady Jennie hatched, she was accepted right along into our extended family.

One month later Jake & I went on our first ride. I can't explain to you the exhilaration I felt during that ride. It was uplifting and deeply spiritual at the same time. Some of Jake's knowledge was given to me and I realized what was expected of me. I thought the flight was too short, but upon landing, I found that we had been gone all day. I also found myself much as I look now. Early forties fit and trim. Everything that had fallen with age now rose to sharp attention. Another thing, it was very cold up there but I didn't care at the time. Damn near froze to death; my lips were blue when we got back. From then on I wore leather when we flew.

"So, that's about it in a nutshell, any questions?" She was looking at him hoping that he wouldn't have too many.

“Damn, that’s one hell of a story! Awful lot to take in all at once...” He was looking at her and marveling at the guts it took to do what she had done. “You have enormous courage woman, I don’t know if I’d have the balls to do the same.” He bent his head and scratched his chin and looked at her. “And you think there is still more to come? And you really believe there is a higher power at work in all this; at least that’s the feeling I get.”

“Yes, it’s the way I have always lived.” She was very animated about it, gesturing with her hands, “I couldn’t imagine God abandoning the human race. Cleansing it maybe, but not totally abandoning it.”

“Well, I can tell you that you’re not the only one who had dreams. For two years I’ve been dreaming about riding a Silver Dragon named Queenie. She flies next to Jake, and you are riding him. This all fits, it all makes sense now. Another thing, years ago when we first went into a cavern after the dragons had left, one of my men, Lester, thought he heard a small child calling for help. He almost went nuts looking for him. Now we know what it meant.”

Daniel closed his eyes and concentrated, *so Jake do you have anything to add?*

Yes Daniel, hurry up and get your strength back so we can go and get more eggs. I am very anxious to meet my Queen. And since you are to be her rider, we cannot do anything until you are completely healed.

Daniel smiled and continued, *by the way, if I didn’t say it before, ‘Thank you’ for saving me. I’m pretty sure I would have died if it hadn’t been for you.*

Do you really think that I would let anything bad happen to the rider of my Queen? Jake asked indignantly.

Of course not, I was just expressing my gratitude. Daniel answered in defense.

Accepted, Daniel.

As Daniel sat on the back porch he looked out on the field to his left. It was partly obscured by a small stand of trees. It was then that he noticed the shadows were moving. He watched as Jake rose up to his full height. *Oh Sweet Jesus, you are unbelievable!*

Of course I am! Jake chuckled.

All right you two, enough with the love-fest. Jake, why don’t you hang around here for a few days? Lady Jennie can keep watch for the camp. And you can indulge yourself in a sunbath. I know your weakness for spreading out your wings on the top of the center and soaking up a few rays.

If you are attempting to bribe me My Lady, you have succeeded! If you should need me for anything, just call.

With that he took to the air and flew off to the center and his own private spa. She turned to face Daniel and saw he was watching Jake fly away. He had that ‘look’ on his face; everyone gets it when they watch Jake rise up and fly.

“Well you’re looking much better. Your strength will start returning quickly now. We just have to be careful not to overdo. Would you care for a short walk?” She watched him carefully. “You’re going to need to get some things for winter. It’s very cold up there in camp during the winter months.”

“A walk, sure, I’d love to stretch my legs a bit.” He turned towards her, and now those grey eyes were looking at her differently. “My energy seems to have come back now that I have some food in me. But I’d like to shower and clean up properly first,” he smiled.

“Of course, everything you need is in your bathroom upstairs. I’ll meet you down here when you’re through. Take your time we’re on no schedule here.” She smiled sweetly at him and he began to see a different person.

She was lounging out on the back porch when he returned a half hour later. She had changed into jeans and a bright yellow tee shirt. He came bounding out onto the porch all fresh and ready to go. He was looking mighty handsome she observed. He had on a pair of the jeans and a white tee shirt. He asked where they would be going.

“Well, I would drive you, but we don’t have a car here. There are a couple of trucks at the center, but I haven’t been able to get them to run. And the dealership in town is no better. I’m not sure, but I think a magnetic pulse hit this area,” she explained.

“You may be right. I know that we used everything in our arsenal against the dragons. In the end they even used nuclear - to no avail. They just ended up polluting the planet. The monsters all seemed to have settled on the west coast. It’s nice and warm, no snow or damp cold winds to contend with, all in all a perfect place for them.”

She got up and went inside and grabbed two windbreakers and a rifle from the mantle over the back door. As she came out onto the back porch, Daniel reached for the rifle as naturally as if he was reaching for the windbreaker. He swung it around on his left shoulder and leaned on the cane she had given him. They left the back porch and followed a stone path that led to the front of the house.

“This is really a nice place; the house design was carefully laid out. A lot of love was put into it. I’m just surprised to find it way out here.” He was looking at the outside of the house now, “even from the outside the house still has a sense of warmth about it.”

He turned around and looked at her. *He could see himself with her - here in this house.* She smiled at him, and for some reason he felt himself blush. *What the hell, I don’t blush; I make other people blush.*

“Look, how do I get on the right track with you?” He had stopped and was facing her. “I admire your strength, and what you have accomplished. It took a great deal of courage to do what you did. I keep trying to get to know you, but I find myself tongue-tied when I’m around you. I open my mouth and promptly insert my foot.” He was looking at her waiting for an answer.

“You just did it Daniel.” She smiled at him, “I was waiting for some kind of natural response from you. I know I can be a little intense sometimes, but this is a very serious situation. The rules of the world as we knew it have changed. I doubt it will ever be the same again.” She pointed to the right indicating they were to go down that way. “I just wanted to be sure you were the one. The one Jake has been waiting for all this time.”

The twins began barking up ahead and were running back and forth.

“Would you like to take a look in the dealership and see if you can get one of the cars going?” She asked him sweetly, changing the subject.

“I’ll give it a try, but you have to help. That way you can teach others.” He was smiling at her and he saw her blush bright red.

“Look, let’s get this out of the way right now.” Now it was her turn to speak what was on her mind. “We both have been having these dreams. Jake tells me that you and I are to be mates. The dreams say the same thing. I’ve been wrestling with that bit of information for some time now, Daniel. It has been a long time, since I have been with a man. I don’t count what happened to me four years ago. I was never very adept in that area. And now these dreams say that we are to be together.” He noticed that she seemed upset by this, “well you will have to forgive me for not doing a back flip and spreading my legs over the whole idea. If I am too blunt for you, sorry, but I believe it’s better to know up front where we stand on this issue.”

“Whoa! Rest easy woman, I have no intention of bedding you like some animal. I have never taken a woman who wasn’t willing. I don’t care what Jake or what the dreams show; we are still free to make our own choices. Maybe we could just start out as friends. That would take the damn pressure off both of us.” He turned and faced her, he wanted to make this easy on her. “Agreed?”

She faced him and looked into his eyes for a bit, and then she nodded and held out her hand. He took it in his and they shook on it.

“Say, just where are we headed?” he asked to change the subject.

“To the dealership, it’s just around the next corner,” she pointed up ahead. “I don’t know much about auto engines.” She had picked up the pace and was out in front of him by a few feet.

One of the twins came bounding out of the brush and just about knocked her over. He was barking and would not let her pass. On closer inspection, he was standing between her and a rattler, curled up tightly on the sidewalk.

“Now you know why Michael left them here. They watch out for us and keep us safe.”

“Well, they’re doing a bang-up job.” He was smiling, trying to put her at ease.

“Reckon’ if I use this cane I can get him to move?”

“Most rattlers strike distance is twice their length,” she informed him. “Saw that on the Discovery channel. Let’s go around him,” she said shaking her head. “I forgot that with no people around, this town is basically wide open to anything that’s out there. We’ll have to be more alert.”

They rounded the corner and he could see a GMC dealership. A big shiny white suburban was on the showroom floor. They went inside, and he went straight to the back of the offices to where the accounting department was located. He went into what was obviously the manager's office. He looked around and found a locked cabinet behind the desk. He opened some draws on the desk and found a ring of keys. The third one opened the cabinet. Inside were the keys to all the cars in the showroom and outside.

Smiling he asked her with a bow, "and what would milady's pleasure be; a suburban perhaps, or maybe a sporty model, or a truck? Personally, I like the Suburban."

"Why suh..." she said putting her hand to her chest, "I just can't possibly make such a decision all by my little ole self." She turned around and held the back of her hand up to her forehead feigning distress. "You must help me suh or I fear that I shall faint from the effort!" They both burst out laughing.

"All right woman! A suburban it is... now if I can do this right, we will have wheels."

He went to the shop and got two batteries, poured something in them and put them on to charge. Then he went to the showroom floor and took the old battery out of the suburban. He checked the gas tank and he had her help him turn on the electricity and he turned on the gas pump. He changed all four tires with brand new ones freshly aired up.

"Why do you want this one in particular?" she asked him.

"The showroom models are generally loaded with all the extras might as well get the best." He said laughing. "Besides, this one has been inside all these years." They discussed how to get the thing off the showroom floor. He found the keys to the large showroom side doors and they opened them. Together they pushed the car out and down a ramp; and it kept right on going into one of the concrete columns on the side of the dealership.

"Oh no! You realize we don't have insurance?" she said in such a deadpan way that he wasn't aware she was joking till she started laughing.

The dent wasn't too deep; the car would still operate without a problem. They pushed the damn thing around to the service shop. There he changed the oil, and lubed what he could. He got the battery off the charger and put it back in the suburban.

"Ok, cross your fingers - here goes nothing!" He turned the key. After a lot of coughing and sputtering, the engine caught. They had wheels!

"Yeehaa! Hey baby, like to go for a ride?" he was grinning from ear to ear.

"Why sir, I believe you are tryin' to take advantage of my good nature." She opened the door and jumped in laughing.

"It ain't your good nature I'm interested in my dear," he said making like Groucho Marx, raising his eyebrows up and down.

They laughed all the way to the center. As they pulled up he could see at the roof edge a bit of black leather draped over the edge of the building. "Is that part of Jake's wing? Is he asleep up there?"

Just resting my dear boy ... was the immediate reply in Daniels' mind.

Full as a tick and sleeping it off is more like it! Kate said laughingly, she knew him well. *We will leave you to your slothful lazy ways.*

A loud roar of 'approval' made Daniel jump, eyes wide he looked at the woman who was laughing at his reaction. She got out of the car and went to the side door and entered a code. There was a woosh as the door opened and he felt the rush of cold air hit his body.

"It's air conditioned!" Daniel blurted out in surprise.

"Nice huh?" She made her way to the sidewall where there was a series of switches. She pulled them all. The place lit up like a Christmas tree. It was an unbelievable sight. The warehouse was huge; it held anything one could want for any occasion. And there were levels, three he thought. The rows were laid out with loose-leafed notebooks at the beginning and end of each. There were big signs saying, 'CHECK YOUR NUMBERS CAREFULLY!'

"When we first found it we sort of went wild; it becomes addictive I can tell you. After, Sam and I came back here and found the catalog book that held the numbers of everything that was stored in here. We went to each row and checked each level. Then we wrote down everything and placed it at the head of each aisle. We went into the town and turned off all the power. We went to all the shops with food, clothing, and any perishables. We moved them all here. It took us the better part of three months, but everything was listed and catalogued. Towards the back of the warehouse you will find a makeshift Mall. Every now and then I like to go there and indulge myself. Jake says it's healthy."

"Do the others come here also? Or is it just for the riders?"

"Oh no, anyone can come here. About twice a year half of the community comes here for 2 weeks. They get any new clothes they need. If they are decorating they can pick up any items they need for their homes. They indulge themselves for a bit. It also allows for a little healthy romance between the men and women."

He looked at her to see any signs that she indulged herself in this also. She stared at him guessing his thoughts.

"No, I do not join them. I prefer to come here alone."

"Well, where is this 'Mall' you spoke of, I believe that is a good place to start. Is there a barber shop?" She nodded yes. "Do you want to go off and do your thing and we could meet back here in a couple of hours?"

"Sounds good to me," she headed off towards her beauty shop, "see you in two hours!"

He watched her go and turned towards the 'Mall' area. He found the barbershop; it was makeshift at best, but it had all the essentials. He got busy and gave himself a shave leaving his mustache intact. His hair was hopeless. It had grown quite long. He needed a haircut, but he couldn't do it himself. Instead he combed it back and fastened it at the nape of the neck with a piece of rawhide shoestring he confiscated from the shoe dept. Next he walked up and down the aisles taking in all he saw and placing in his mind for future reference. They had really done quite a job.

He found the men's section and took a long look around. She said the winters were very cold up there so he looked for some long johns, and some ski clothes, gloves, thermal socks, and ski boots. He thought to himself that when he made his own cave, he would come here for whatever items he needed. On the second level he found an area roped off - it held weapons. A real nice crossbow and some arrows caught his eye, silent, but deadly. He took one and swung it over his left shoulder. He felt like a kid in a candy shop. He heard movement behind him, and as he turned, he reached for the rifle he had laid on a crate. It was just one of the twins, with a ball in his mouth. He grabbed the slobbering mess and tossed it off as far as he could throw it. The dog gave a quick bark and turned and bounded after it.

I guess it's his playtime, he thought to himself.

He went to the front of the warehouse and found some carts that were probably used to move small crates to different areas. He took one of those and filled it with his booty, then went looking for more. *She was right this was addictive.*

He hadn't had this much fun in a long time. He was on the second level looking over a catalogue at the front of one of the aisles when he caught movement below. Quietly he moved beside a crate and peered below. It was the woman; she had done something to her hair and had also put on make-up. The change was striking; she was really quite beautiful. Standing there watching her as she bent over a crate he felt himself unexpectedly come to life.

Easy 'general', down boy; now is not the time.

He grinned to himself as he pictured her in some very explicit poses. The dreams had supplied him with many of these.

I've got to stop doing this - any action right now would put her off.

He had known of women like her. Some were almost destroyed emotionally by a cretin; or hurt in their younger years so badly that they shut themselves down. They were very shy around men, and at first seem very standoffish. But these were women of strong will, these were survivors. There was only one way to break thru their barrier...patience. What these women wanted was a strong man to take them in hand and treat them like they were still young girls.

Patience and gentle kindness was the thing that would work with her.

Good Heavens! I had no idea that you people were so duplicitous! Jake burst into Daniel's mind. Daniel, none of those things will work on my Lady. She is totally different from what you think.

Jake! Daniel was surprised, taken off guard. I didn't know you were listening in on my thoughts.

I am sorry Daniel, but they just sort of filtered in and I became interested. Your idea will not work in this case. You see I know that she wants to feel wanted and pursued again. I know that she is very attracted to you, but Daniel, she is so terribly afraid. The fear of being ridiculed and humiliated again is very strong. Believe me I have tried to help her in this, but she tells me to quote unquote 'butt-out!' Your task will be quite difficult.

Why is it so all fired important that we become mates? I know that I will ride your Queen. I have seen it in my dreams. You can still have her, and you're Lady and I will just be friends.

It is not that simple Daniel. You see when two dragons mate - their riders feel everything. Everything that they are feeling, only more intensified. You will not be able to control your actions. You will find yourselves in the throes of pure animal lust. You will mate as we mate. There will be no stopping it, Daniel. Can you imagine what this would do to her if you were not already mates? Daniel was taken aback, I wasn't aware that something like that would happen, Jake. I can see where you're coming from now; and I understand what you are trying to say. But Jake, in my dreams I see her with me. And I mean 'with' me. I believe it will work out the way it's suppose to in due time.

Jake left as quickly as he had come. Daniel didn't want her to think he had been spying on her. So he grabbed a big handful of his stuff, and started to make a lot noise walking down the ramp to his cart. He didn't look in her direction at all, hoping that she would think that he didn't know she was there. It worked. He pretended to stumble and fall down and threw his clothes all over.

“Great! I can't even walk without stumbling around like a 2 yr old!”

Then he turned and saw her looking at him. He stared at her for a few seconds, and then burst out laughing. She joined him shaking her head and laughing. She helped him up and when he put his arm around her waist he felt her stiffen; it was ever so slight, but he felt it.

“You are doing too much, too soon. You need to pace yourself. Besides, we should stop for lunch. What do you say? Can I bribe you with food? Sandwiches, pickles, chips, soda or beer?” she waited expectantly for his answer.

“Yes ma'am! I can be bought! You can have your way with me, a beer would do it!” He was smiling and looking directly at her.

“Let's get this stuff to the car and load it up,” she suggested. They pushed the cart to the open doors, and she told him to go get in the car. She would put everything in the back. He wouldn't hear of it and helped carry his share of the load.

“You're just as stubborn as I am,” she told him, and he just grinned at her and headed for the drivers side, **“and I suppose you want to drive too?”** she said handing him the keys.

She closed the rear door of the car, went to the warehouse door and put her fingers in her mouth and blasted the silence with a shrill whistle that made him jump. A few seconds later the 'twins' came bounding out of the building and jumped into the car. She closed the door and entered a code. She came down the steps and got in the car.

“Home James, and don't take the freeway.” She turned around and reached behind her for something in the back seat. Then she turned around and handed him an ice-cold beer - in a coozie!

“Whoa, you are priceless, I just may keep you around!” he took a long drink. **“Hmm, this is great.”** At which point a loud belch erupted from him, **“sorry,”** he said sheepishly.

As they drove back to the house they could see lightening off in the distance. A storm was moving into the area. "How soon before it gets here?" he asked her.

"Couple of hours I think. It's hard to tell." She was staring off into the distance, "sometimes they just blow themselves out."

"Well, I guess that does it for our exploring the town this afternoon. I really wanted to get into the movie theater and see what they had." She looked at him questioningly. "Seriously, I love sci-fi movies."

"You like science fiction?" He nodded yes and she smiled at him, "Well now, the video store had quite a lot of them. We moved all of them to the air-conditioned warehouse. I guess we will have to come back later and take a look."

"I take it there is a DVD player at the house. I don't remember seeing one, but then I wasn't looking for one." He said as they turned a corner.

"There's a built-in entertainment unit hidden by the bookcase in the living room. It has a big screen TV, DVD player, and a stereo system that will knock your socks off!" She turned facing him and continued, "I love smooth jazz and I really crank it up when I'm here by myself. Pat Metheny, the Rippingtons, Keiko Matsue, and a host of others I can't remember right now."

"Say, is it me or is it getting hot?" He asked her.

She reached over and felt his forehead. "Shit! We pushed the envelope." Alarm flashed in her eyes, "When we get back I give you some Tylenol, and I think maybe a nap is in order."

"But what about lunch, I feel okay, just warm. Can't we have lunch first; I am so looking forward to that pickle," he teased her.

"OK, lunch it is, and then nap time for you." Then in a somber tone she said, "I don't want you to have a relapse Daniel."

They rounded the corner and drove up to the house. After they were in, she left him to his 'booty' and she headed to the kitchen. She started making them some sandwiches on rye bread. She got the chips down and the big dill pickles out of the refrigerator. She couldn't get the jar opened...so she marched into the living room and handed him the jar. He took it, twisted the top off and handed it back to her without even a second look. She fixed their plates, got the beer out of the frig and then announced... "Lunch is ready!"

They ate at the bar. He took a long swig of his beer. "Ah! This is great! I haven't had one of these in so long, years I think. So, what kind of Sci-fi do you like?"

She finished what was in her mouth and answered him. "I don't like the slicer-dicer stuff. That really isn't Sci-fi. Remember the old black and white movies; *The Crawling Eye*; *Them*; *Creature from the Black Lagoon*; *Beginning of the End*; *The Blob*; and *War of the Worlds*. Now that was good creature stuff! In later years the *Alien* series – (I & II were the best), *Star Wars*, and the *Stargate SG-1* series on TV was the greatest."

“No way,” he said with surprise, “I used to watch that every chance I got. I paid a pretty penny for the full DVD series, plus the movies.”

They finished lunch, and she cleaned up the kitchen. He sat there talking and they were deep in a debate about the Star Trek series when she reminded him he had to rest for a bit. “We shall continue this later woman. Voyager doesn’t even belong to the same genre.”

“You are a pig-headed, opinionated jerk!” she told him grinning.

“We will see about that! Right now,” he said as he grabbed the banister on the stairs, “whoa I’m a little dizzy here.”

She was by his side in a flash. “Did you take the Tylenol like I asked you?”

“Not yet, I’m a thick head, remember?”

She slid her arm around his waist and helped him up the stairs. He enjoyed doing the same to her. She got him to his room, and he went into the bathroom and got the Tylenol and took 3 of them with water. He closed the door and took a pee, washed up and then went out to the bed. She was still there waiting for him.

“Let me look at you, please,” she put her hands on his face, felt his forehead, and checked his pulse. “Maybe you just did too much for one day.”

“I think you may be right, a nap sounds real good right about now.” He stretched and yawned deeply, “Don’t let me sleep longer than a couple of hours, okay?”

He was out in the time it took her to go to her room and look out the window at the weather. She changed into a long-sleeved white tee shirt and a pair of jeans. It was getting colder, so she put on some socks and her black boots. She went downstairs and checked out the videos that were here at the house.

The storm stayed out in the desert, but the temperature kept dropping. He slept for 3 hours before she woke him. They were on no timetable, so she didn’t see the harm in letting him rest longer. When she entered the room to wake him, he was lying on his back, one arm behind his head. His hair had come loose and some was splayed across his face.

***Mmm, I’d like to be cuddled up next to you, big guy.* She gently moved the hair away from his face.**

“Daniel, Daniel wake up,” She bent down and gently touched his shoulder. He was instantly awake. She gave a backwards start. “Hey there sleeping beauty, time to get up.” He stretched and rubbed his eyes. Then he smiled at her.

She rattled the car keys over his head. “Want some candy– go for a ride?”

“Do not tempt me woman,” He winked at her and smiled.

“If you feel up to it, we can go take a quick look at the movies in the warehouse.” She teased him.

He was up in a flash. “Just let me get ready. I’ll meet you downstairs,” he shouted as he went into the bathroom. Ten minutes later he came down the stairs looking neat and well rested. He had retied his hair, and had on a navy turtleneck.

“Don’t forget a windbreaker, the temperature has started to drop,” she called to him. “I think we may be in for a storm this evening.”

He watched as she headed out the back door. She was in jeans and a windbreaker that covered a white tee shirt. There was a strong wind blowing outside and it blew the windbreaker open, the shirt hugged her body. It was obvious she didn’t have on a bra. She was a fine figure of a woman, and he woke up feeling pretty randy. *Control yourself man!* He followed her out.

He got in the suburban and she handed him the keys. “You remember the way?”

“Yes ma’am,” he said saluting, “forward HO!”

“Thirsty?”

“Me thinks you have something in mind?”

“Beer or soda?”

“Beer! I don’t get to do this very often.”

She handed him one and he took a long swallow, “I am definitely going to keep you around!”

She took out one for herself, “If I get silly, please excuse me, I do not handle beer very well.”

“Madam, you have my word as a gentleman, I shall look after you.”

Said the spider to the fly... this should be interesting.

She turned on the CD in the car and had a Los Lobos CD in playing. The music had a definite Spanish/Flamingo flair to it. It was catchy, and they were both put into good moods,

“Now what’s this bullshit about ‘Voyager’?” she said turning towards him smiling.

“I can see I’m not going to get out of it. Ok, I think it was an ass-kiss to the feminist movement. All the other shows had strong male captains. Now this Captain Janeway was supposed to have gone thru the same training that all Starfleet captains go through. No way, I’m not buying it. On every show she let her emotions rule her decisions. It was a crock! Captain Picard would never have made the decisions she did.”

“Much as I don’t want to agree, I think you may be right. But see, I go the movies to be entertained. I don’t want to see socially relevant shows, or be preached at, or enlightened, or anything else; just entertained!” She was gesturing wildly with her hands, “That’s why I enjoy Sci-fi so much. It’s pure escapism!”

“I can see where you’re coming from, but you also don’t want to be thought of as an idiot. I mean the premise of the story has to be believable. If it isn’t, then you’ve got a piece of crap. You got to have a good story line. And then go from there to a believable outcome.”

“Favorites?” she asked him.

“Too many to remember right now; just wait a while, they will come to me.”

“How about Armageddon, or Independence Day?” She was grinning at him, “I really enjoyed those two a lot.”

“Yeah, those were good, so was the Lord of the Rings series. They were really done well. And, I know its silly so don’t laugh, but I loved ‘StarShipTroopers’. It was so campy it was fun.”

It was funny how he enjoyed the same movies she did. She never would have thought that a man like him would go for those types of movies. They both took long swigs of their beer and let out huge belches at the same time. They laughed all their way to the center.

“Say, do you want Popcorn and Pizza while we watch the movies?” she asked him.

“Pizza definitely, and more beer; and possibly more Pizza!” He was having a good time, “this may be an all nighter!”

“Ok then, you have to pull in here first. He screeched around a sharp curve, and pulled up to a different warehouse. She hopped out and went up the stairs with him right behind her. She put in a code and the door opened. This place was different. There was a waiting room area in front of two huge doors. There were thick jumpsuits hanging on some pegs beside a table with heavy gloves on it.

“We have to put on those overalls hanging up over there,” she said pointing to a wall where many garments were hanging. “It’s cold in there believe me, very cold! And gloves too Daniel, especially gloves. Frostbite, you know.” They proceeded to don the outfits, and she motioned to him to grab the gloves on the table. They went inside and he immediately saw why the extra clothes were necessary. It was the biggest freezer he had ever seen. The cold began to penetrate his boots almost immediately. There were sides of beef hanging in row upon row as far as he could see. Toward the back they went thru another set of doors into another freezer. This one wasn’t as cold as the first.

“What is all this?” He asked, “I assume you’ve set this up like this for a reason.”

“We keep the first one cryogenically cold, to keep the meat as long as possible. One of the guys in the camp was an engineer, and one was a butcher. Together they came up with the idea. When we want some meat, we take it out of the first freezer and bring it into the second for a few days. Then we take it to the regular refrigeration unit to thaw. That way the meat doesn’t get freezer burn, and doesn’t go bad. It works pretty well, and keeps the meat indefinitely.” She pointed down an aisle; “Ok now, you wanted Pizza, lets see... you’re going to have to look around in here, I don’t know exactly where they put them. I’m going to get some other supplies from the refrigeration unit. Be right back.”

He looked around and found the Pizzas, and also found the steak aisle. “Oh yes!” Daniel walked the aisle and came upon some thick rib eyes. “We are going to Bar-B-Q tomorrow. Now we need baked potatoes, and corn on the cob, and a salad would be great.”

She came back and heard him mumbling to himself. “What’s up doc?”

“We are going to have a Bar-B-Q tomorrow, woman. Big rib eyes with baked potatoes and corn on the cob, if possible.” He was looking at her with a devilish grin. “I don’t suppose lettuce is available?”

“Sorry, no. But we do have big potatoes at the house. And we can smother them in sour cream and cheese and bacon bits, and fresh chives. Let me go get the corn.”

“You’re on! You do the potatoes and corn and I’ll take care of the meat.” He headed for the doors with his load. They took off their clumsy outfits and left the center. They got back to the car and loaded everything in the rear. Then they headed over to the main center.

“Would you mind opening the door, Daniel?” She looked at him sweetly, “the code is 4036 star; I’ll be there in a second.”

He got out and went over and up the stairs to the door thinking to him self; *She gave me the code, so she trusts me a little bit.* He entered the code and the doors opened.

She got out of the car and followed him inside. “It’s on the second level all the way towards the back,” she yelled as she ran by, “race you!” She was off like a shot.

He was right behind her trying to pass her when she tripped on a wire. She would have gone over the edge if he hadn’t caught her in time. He grabbed her and pulled her to him hard. He could smell the soap she had used that morning in the shower, it was a fresh flower smell and the effect on him was immediate. He quickly covered, “Easy there, I don’t want to lose my cook.” He let her go and raced down the gangway. “I’m going to win my dear!”

She took a deep breath. *Damn, that felt good!* She took off running again but to no avail. He was there waiting for her with a smirk on his face.

“Ok, so you won, big deal! You still don’t know where the Sci-fi is and I do. It’s over here, these two bins.” They wheeled one of the bins out a bit and tipped it on its side. Then they were like greedy kids going thru them all.

“Hey, here’s Godzilla, and Mothra; this must be the cheesy Japanese section.”

“Here’s the Star Wars collection, the old ones.”

“Here’s Jurassic Park, and here’s the Jason series...ugh!”

“Hey look at this, there’s a whole box filled with anime... the good stuff. ‘Ghost in a Shell, and the Wolf’s Rain series; ah, here’s Akira...”

Look, here’s Wolf with Jack Nicholson and Michelle Pfeiffer. That was a good one. You want to watch that one?”

“Sure, it’s your call, you won the race so you get to pick,” she was smiling at him, enjoying the easy carefree moment with him.

OK, I got 4; Wolf, Armageddon, a surprise, and one you probably don’t know, Reign of Fire.”

“Are you kidding, that one has become a cult movie,” she smirked.

“No kidding!” he stood and tipped an invisible hat to her. “You are the boss! Let’s get going before it gets dark outside.” They righted the bin; put everything back in place, and left.

As they drove home the conversation drifted to the pros and cons of having big name stars in Sci-fi movies. “Look at Charlton Heston in ‘Planet of the Apes’; that was a hit because of him and his box office drawing ability.” He was adamant about making that point.

“Bull! ‘Wolf’ was a bomb; and it had Nicholson and Pfeiffer,” she quickly retorted.

As they rounded the corner and came up the hill, they could see in the distance a lot of dark ominous clouds and lightening across the sky.

“We’re not going to dodge the bullet tonight Daniel. It’s going to be a nasty one. We’ll have to close all the shutters on the house before it hits.”

“Perfect night for a Sci-fi Festival, the weather will fit right in!” He cheerfully exclaimed.

They arrived back at the house and hurriedly brought their goodies in and put them away. She then showed him how the shutters worked on the large living room windows. They went upstairs also and shut all the shutters up there. They let the ‘twins’ out before the storm arrived, and the silly dogs ran around for a time barking at nothing and chasing each other. After a time Daniel called them and they bounded inside and slid across the rug on the living room floor.

Back in the kitchen, she was turning on the oven when a rather loud crack of thunder sounded and she jumped and dropped the pizza cutter.

“The thunder can get really bad. It shakes the house and rattles the pictures on the walls. I hate it - probably because it frightens me. But you are here tonight, so I shall be a brave little trooper. Let’s get the Pizzas going. Damn, I need a beer, how about you?”

“I’m ready for a cold one. Want me to set up the movie?”

“Yes, that would be great,” she shouted from the kitchen. She took a long swallow and then belched like a truck driver.

“Good Lord woman, I believe you out did me!” he walked into the kitchen grinning. “I think ‘Armageddon’ is called for first; what with all the thunder going on about this place it will fit right in perfectly.” He set up the movie and returned to the kitchen watching her as she worked.

“Say,” he asked her, “do you want me to feed the twins?”

She nodded and motioned to the cabinet under the cupboard. He pulled the double doors open and dragged out a huge tub labeled ‘Dog Food’; opened it and scooped out a bowl for each of them. They came running into the kitchen and tried to ‘help’ and Daniel ended up on the floor with food all over him, and the twins licking his face. “Eat it up guys, enjoy.”

She was laughing at his predicament, “The pizza will be ready in about 45 minutes. We picked the best kind, got to cook it in the oven. This house is going to smell like an Italian restaurant shortly.” The thunder was getting louder and closer. *I need to drown out that horrid racket!*

She took another swig of her beer and went out into the living room to the entertainment center. “I’m going to put on some music until we’re ready for the pizza.” She took out a Laura & Reyes CD and put it on. She cranked it up and suddenly the house was filled with Latin music. She took another long pull of her beer.

The thunder was agitating her. He could feel it and decided to diffuse the situation. He came out of the kitchen with his hands in the air, clapping in time to the guitars and shouting, “Yipa, Yipa! Lets dance woman!”

To his surprise she started swaying with the music, dancing around him in a circle, clapping her hands. She was barefoot, and her hips swiveled in time to the music. She was radiant; she seemed to have let go of her inhibitions, but he knew it was the beer. He would have to be careful and not spook her. Luckily the twins picked that time to come in and join them. Barking and running around in circles chasing them. The both laughed at the dogs, and after two songs she went into the kitchen to check on the pizzas. He followed and stood in the archway.

“You know what I miss most at times like this?”

She looked at him with a glint in her eye, “Cigarettes!”

“You read my mind woman!” *This was getting down right eerie!*

Shaking her head no she said, “No, I was a smoker too! And if you promise not to tell, I’ll take you to my stash!”

“Lead on woman, my lips are sealed! You know you just can’t have beer and music without smoking a cigarette or two or three.”

“It’s uncivilized!” she chimed in,

She took him into the pantry where the freezer was and she opened it up and took out several boxes of frozen cauliflower. In one there were several packs of Marlboro lights, and in the other Capri menthols. She threw him a pack of Marlboro’s and took one of hers. Then she put everything back in place. They went back into the house and sat at the bar.

He lit up first, “Oh man, it’s been too long. Near as I can guess about 3 to 4 years since I last lit up a decent cigarette. We found some in one town, but they were so stale it was terrible.”

“It’s the freezer. They will keep indefinitely as long as they are in a freezer.” She went over to the frig and got 2 more beers and set them on the counter. Then she opened her pack and lit up. She took a long drag, “Oh this is good!” Just then the music stopped, and there was a loud crack of thunder. The entire house vibrated from the shock.

Daniel leaped off the bar stool, “Son of a bitch! Damn you weren’t kidding about the thunder!” Daniel could see the effect the thunder had on the woman, her face was drained of color. “Hey, let’s eat in the living room, ok?”

“Sounds good to me,” she immediately joined in, “why don’t you go start the movie and I’ll get the pizzas out of the oven and slice them up.”

She turned around and reached up into the cupboard for two plates. She also got down a large platter. The timer went off and she removed the pizzas from the oven. The movie was still showing the credits when she entered the room with her hands full. He went to her side taking the large platter and putting it down on the coffee table. She placed the plates and napkins down also. Then she took a swig of her beer, and looked to see where she was going to sit. He had pulled the couch around to face the TV and placed the coffee table right between the two. She plopped herself at one end of the couch and he sat at the other. They watched the movie and greedily stuffed their faces. Occasionally a comment or two broke the silence.

“Ok, ok, this is the part I love to watch over and over again. When the two shuttles take off a minute apart, it is so cool!” He was watching her and getting caught up in her enjoyment and her reactions to the movie. “What?” She was looking at him with furrowed brows.

“Just soaking up some of your enthusiasm,” he said with a grin. “You really get into these don’t you?”

“Well duh? The whole idea is to entertain, right? So why not enjoy the different parts of the movie. I mean, what fun is there, if a movie is some dark melodrama.” She explained passionately, “That’s not entertaining. I want to be excited, guess what’s coming next. You know what I mean.”

He was smiling at her. “Yeah, I know what you mean.” They continued to watch and his mind was racing with thoughts about her. Her voice brought him out of his daydream.

“Now this is where they depart from the fun stuff and put some stupid military stunt in here. I mean they wouldn’t just detonate a nuclear bomb by remote control. That’s just so bogus; they ruined a perfectly good film with a stupid subplot.”

“I never really thought about it before.” He saw that she was very complex in her thinking.

They finished eating, and watched the rest of the movie. While he changed the DVD, she cleaned up and got them two more beers. As she was walking back into the room there was a flash of light and a deafening bang. The whole house shook, several pictures fell off the walls, and she froze in mid step. Seeing the look of fear on her face he was quickly off the couch and at her side.

She burrowed her head against his chest as his arms encircled her. “It’s okay, it’s just a storm,” He told her. “It can’t hurt us.”

“You haven’t been in one of these before have you? They can go on for hours. I generally wrap myself in a couple of comforters and hide in a corner at the back of my cave.” She was trembling. “I think it has something to do with the way the weather changed after ‘They’ came. Storms are really much more intense, lightening strikes are the worst. I don’t like this one bit. Jake? Are we in any danger?” *Jake?*

No my Lady, you will be fine. I have every confidence in Daniel. He will not let anything bad happen to you. I am allowing him to listen to our conversation; you do not mind do you?

No Jake, I don’t mind. I’m sorry, I know I’m acting like a baby, I guess I just panicked. It’s the noise, it’s so loud and the whole house shakes. It’s spooky that’s all.

Do we need to get to shelter Jake? Daniel felt like he should be doing something, Should we go to the cellar?

No Daniel, the storm is moving out of the area now. The wind is starting to pick up and I believe that it will rain soon. The temperature is dropping rapidly. You two should be safe in the house. Have a pleasant evening!

She suddenly realized that she was still standing there in his arms. She let out a slow breath and stepped away, “I’m ok now.” She went over to the couch and sat down. She looked up at him; “well, I feel like a silly goose.”

“Actually my dear, you feel pretty good,” he gave her his best WC Fields imitation. “Seriously, if you’d like to curl up next to me on the couch, we can put in another movie and chain smoke the night away.” He was smiling at her patting his end of the couch, trying to put her at ease.

There was another loud burst of thunder and that made up her mind for her. “You’re on cowboy!” She said as she grabbed a blanket and scooted over towards him. “Is it me or is it really getting cold in here?”

“No, I’m fine right now.” He grabbed the remote and started the movie, nonchalantly putting a throw pillow across his chest. “Come here and get comfortable woman.”

She came over and made herself comfortable leaning against him. They both settled down to watch the movie. Jake was right, the thunder and lightning finally subsided, and the wind began. A loud, howling wind, with a pelting rain began.

As the movie started she watched and then shouted, "Oh no! You didn't!" He was laughing at her reaction. And then they both began to mouth the announcement:

**"Do you have what it takes to be a Citizen?
Are you interested...
Want to hear more..."**

He had put in 'Starship Troopers'. They spent the next two hours in riotous laughter seriously mocking the actors and making like the 'bugs'. By the time it was over they were laughing so hard tears were streaming down their faces.

"I've never had such a good time at the movies before," he told her. "Seriously, this was great!"

She stared at him for a long time smiling, and then stood up and did something he never expected. She bent over and took his face in her hands and kissed him full on the mouth. (*Well done, lady!*) Then she was off in a flash climbing the stairs two at a time yelling behind her, "I've gotta pee like a race horse!"

He was completely taken off guard. *Son of a bitch! I never figured on that happening. All right Jake, all bets are off.*

Daniel, this is your area of expertise, I am out of it from here on. I have given you all the information you need.

She came down the stairs and went into the kitchen. She fixed herself a coke and brought him one. He excused himself and went to the bathroom. His mind was racing. He knew what he wanted to do; but he felt that would put her off. He had to tread carefully. He washed up and decided to call it a night before things got out of control.

She was sitting on one of the big chairs peering thru the shutters at the storm outside when he returned. She looked like a little girl sitting there. He marveled at how she could be so cold and hard when she was called upon to be the leader of the community. When she said she came to this house to unwind she wasn't kidding. She was like a different person altogether.

"What?" She was grinning, and then she got serious, "if I offended you I apologize. I took liberties and I shouldn't have. I must look like a silly old fool."

"Not from where I'm sitting." *You look good enough to eat woman*, he thought to himself. "I think it's getting pretty late, maybe we should call it a night, what do think?"

"Oh, you're probably right. We did have such a good time; I just don't want it to end." She went to him and gave him a quick hug and said "Good night Daniel, I'm glad you are here, sleep well." She went upstairs to her room.

He sat there for a while thinking about all that had taken place during the day. His mind went over everything she had told him. *Jake, are you awake?*

Is there a problem Daniel?

No, no problem Jake. I sent her to bed, and I'm wide-awake. I can't seem to turn off my mind. I've been thinking about everything that has happened, and everything that she told me. And I was wondering about a few things.

Go ahead Daniel; I have been expecting your questions.

Well, first off, I think what happened, all of this; I think that we got a long overdue spanking. I know it sounds crazy, but we really deserved it. The world was on the brink. But Jake, was it God, were you sent by Him? And where does all that religious stuff fit into the world now?

It is a different world now, Daniel. The Father does not reveal his designs to us. We are only his servants; He tells us what our task is, and what we must attempt to accomplish. Eons ago man was chosen to go his own way alone; to see where it would ultimately take him. Your world was in chaos Daniel, even you agree on that point.

Yes Jake, I'm ashamed to say, we made a real mess of everything, Daniel said contritely.

War and terrorism, the deliberate genocide of a race of people; these were all very bad things. Man hated his fellow man, unacceptable!

Jake's voice took on the tone of a father admonishing his child.

Your world was so negative Daniel; it was on the brink of total annihilation. Decisions were made that we are not privy to, and now we begin again. Only this time, the Dragons were called forth once again to serve with man. We shall see where it will take us.

We were such fools Jake, in our hatred for anyone different from us we ended up losing it all.

Daniel's voice was almost desperate in tone, he sighed deeply, millions have died, only a handful of us left. Tell me, do we have a chance this time?

Time will tell Daniel, but to put your mind at ease, remember this; you have all been chosen for a specific purpose. It was not just random chance. Do not worry yourself about this now. When your Dragon Queen hatches all will be clear to you. Now you must rest my friend.

Thank you for being honest with me Jake; good night.

Daniel smoked another cigarette, and thought about everything Jake had said for a long time. Then he went up to bed. He noticed as he climbed the stairs it was getting much colder. He saw that the woman had put a large comforter on the end of his bed. He started to go to her room to say thanks and then thought better of it. He lay there for a time and finally drifted off to sleep.

The sky was bright and the air was crisp, he could feel the wind flowing over the both of them; they were lying on the cool grass. He was so content; completely at ease and very happy. Then suddenly they were in the air, flying above a desert. He looked to his left and she was right there. Jake and Queenie were straining to be closer to each other. They're just like us, he thought. They can't get enough of each other. It would be another 2 hours before they got to the coast. Suddenly there was fire everywhere; they were being attacked! Queenie shouted to him to hold on tight and she banked to the right and shot away so fast he almost lost his grip. He had time to see Jake do the same. They came up behind a torn, tattered, much smaller version of themselves. In unison they blasted it to ashes.

He was startled awake by a loud crash. He sat bolt upright in the bed listening to see if he could determine where the sound came from. Rain was beating down on the house and the wind was howling. *It sounded like broken glass I think.* For a minute he needed to make sure he wasn't still dreaming. *Shit, it's freezing in here.* BANG! *Where did that sound come from?* He thought he heard muffled noises. He strained his ears trying to get a direction. *It was coming from her room!* He rushed down the hall and threw open her door.

There was a loud boom and a flash of lightening; the scene before him was frozen. Wind and rain were pelting her thru a broken window. She was standing there dripping wet and shivering. She was trying to grab the latch on one of the shutters. The wind kept blowing it out of her reach. How long this had been going on he didn't know, but it was long enough that her lips had turned blue. It was freezing in there.

She was yelling something at him, "W.w..window br..broke, sh..shutter..... got to close it." Her body trembled from the cold.

He quickly moved past her and reached out and grabbed the latch and pulled it closed. He turned around and faced her. There was blood on her ankle and her leg; she was standing on broken glass. Her bedclothes were dripping wet and clinging to her body showing every curve. She was trembling badly. He lifted her up off the broken glass and placed her on the rug beside her bed. He went into her bathroom and grabbed some towels. He wrapped her in a large one and told her to take off her wet clothing. Then he proceeded to dry her, starting with her hair and working his way down. She was shivering badly and he knew he had to get her dry quickly before hypothermia set in. He was rubbing her vigorously trying to get the circulation going again. Then he went over to her dresser and rummaged thru the drawers and found a tee shirt and some sweat pants.

"Here, lift your arms," he pulled the tee shirt over her head. *I know this body so well, damn what timing!*

He grabbed the pants and held them for her, "lift your leg and step into this, easy girl I've got ya," he said as he held her arm for balance. "There you go, come here and sit down," he told her, "I want to check your ankle, you're bleeding." She hadn't even noticed. "It's your foot. Did you step on some broken glass?"

"I g..guess so, I d..don't know." She was shaking all over. "So ss... oo c..cold.."

He went to her bathroom and found a first aid kit. He checked her foot and saw it was a deep slice, but it would heal. He cleaned it carefully, and then bandaged it up. He got a pair of socks and put them on her feet. She was shaking violently now. He picked her up in his arms and headed for the door, there was a surprised look on her face. He left her room and headed down the hall to his. He put her in his bed, piled on comforters, and climbed in with her.

"You need to get warm, and body heat is all I can think of right now." She shook her head yes and yielded to his arms. He pulled her to him and held her tightly. Then he began rubbing her arms up and down. He reached down and did the same to her legs to get the circulation going. He pulled her to him and tried to wrap himself around her. He tried to give her as much of his warmth as possible. After a time her shivering slowed; exhaustion finally overtook her and she fell into a deep sleep curled up in his arms. He lay there wishing the circumstances were different. He dozed off himself after he was sure she was sleeping soundly.

High on top of the mountain a pair of black eyes twirled in excitement. *Nicely done! Things are moving along well. It won't be long now.*

Daniel woke the next morning refreshed and full of energy. She was curled up on her side next to him. Her hair was all tussled, and she was hugging the pillow to her. He carefully got out of bed not wishing to wake her. *Sleep woman, you went thru enough last night.* He grabbed some clean clothes and carefully shut the door. He used her bathroom and showered and changed. Then he went downstairs and let the ‘twins’ out. He made some coffee and got himself a glass of juice. He decided to go for a run, to help clear his head. The ‘twins’ were only too glad to have him join them.

Everything that has happened since I got to the mountains has pushed us together. The dreams showed me the way here, and also what was to be. I thought that last night we had gotten pretty close. She had actually kissed me. But then she pulled back. Seeing her last night, touching her, having her in my arms was too much. I wanted her more than I have ever wanted any woman. I think I’ve been patient long enough. Well, no more! I can’t go after my dragon until we’re together. And I want my dragon! When the opportunity presents itself again, I’m going to go for it, damn it!

After about an hour he headed back to the house. He came in and fed the ‘twins’. Then he set about making some breakfast. He heard the water running in the shower upstairs so he knew she was awake. Pancakes, that’s what I’ll make. They are always good on a cold morning. He heard her coming down the stairs and prepared a juice for her. She came into the kitchen quietly and sat down.

“Good Morning.” She had on a pair of jeans and a red long sleeved turtleneck. “Mmm ...something smells good.”

“How’s the foot?” He was looking at her with concern.

“Actually, it’s almost healed, see...,” she had sat down and was lifting it to show him. “... just another benefit, you heal up quickly.”

“Coffee?”

“Yes, please. Daniel, I want to thank you for last night. Anyone else would have taken advantage of the situation.”

“Woman, do not for one moment think that I didn’t consider it!” He said with more force than he intended. “I am only human, and you are a treasure most men would kill for nowadays. Do not underestimate yourself, or me.” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Now, how do pancakes sound; with gobs of syrup and sausage.” He asked with a smile.

“Sounds great, I’m starving.” She smiled at him, and then said, “by the way, what are we going to do about the window? There’s no place to get a new glass pane.”

“We’ll just have to put some plywood over it and nail it shut. Can’t have the house open to who knows what when we’re not here, can we?” He was busy making the pancakes while the sausage sizzled in another frying pan.

“Right, is the Bar-B-Q still on; or have you changed your mind?” she was fishing to see if their relationship had changed.

“Damn right it’s on! I want those ribeyes. And I have the perfect movie for tonight. That is if we can find it. ‘The Fifth Element’ ...what do you think?” He was grinning – proud of himself.

“Yes! That’s a great one!” She smiled at him.

“We can look and see what’s in the bin. Foods up,” he handed her a plate and fixed one for himself.

They ate in silence, both hungry. She offered to clean up since he made breakfast. He got busy at the end of the island preparing a marinade for the rib eyes. He put them in a large bowl and covered them and put them back in the refrigerator. He came over to the sink and rinsed his hands. Grabbing the dishtowel he dried his hands and asked, “So, what’s on the agenda for today?”

“First I’d like to say something, if you don’t mind. But I want to get it out of the way.”

“Go ahead,” he stared at her intently.

“I’ve dreamt about you for a long time.” She said quietly, “and I thought it was just wishful thinking, but Jake kept saying ‘no, that is your mate’. I didn’t want to believe it; but the dreams persisted, and they became so real. The things you did to me made me feel again. Sometimes I would wake up and I could still feel you. Then you walked into our camp – it was too surreal. I’m flying blind here Daniel, I don’t know what to do, and I’m afraid.” She sighed deeply and looked at him, waiting for a response.

“I’ve dreamt about you too. I’ve had you in my dreams for almost 2 years, in more ways than one I don’t mind saying. I know you very well woman, every inch of your body, every line on your face. When we came into camp I was thrown for a loop. To suddenly see you in the flesh, well it was a bit of a shock. For a while I tried to deny it, but I won’t do that anymore.”

He reached over and took her hand in his. “Good things are worth waiting for. Lets just take it a day at a time.” He rose and reached over and put his hand under her chin tilting her head to him and gently kissed her on the lips. She blushed. *Cute!*

“By the way, from now on we sleep together. No pressure, just fact.”

“Yes Daniel,” she said in a soft voice and had he looked he would have seen a small smile on her face.

“As to today, do you think the Library in town has a detailed map of the California coast? I’d like to get a good picture of the lay of the land between here and there. We need to get an idea of what we are going to face out there.” He was thinking ahead.

“Yes, I believe there is a rather large area with maps and charts. That was the one building I insisted that we leave the electricity on. All those books would have turned to dust long ago if I hadn’t. We can go over and have a look. Just let me get my shoes on, and do my hair.” She was off like a shot.

He changed and put on a white cardigan sweater. *Ah much warmer!* He could hear the hair dryer going and knew she would be a few minutes. Coming back downstairs he reached for the crossbow, and called for the ‘twins’.

“Want to go for a ride guys? Yea, that’s right, go for a ride.” They were jumping up and down; they knew what a ride was now and they were ready. He went into the pantry and took out the small cooler. He took 4 cokes out of the frig and some ice packs. He placed it on the back seat, and started the car to warm it up.

“Time’s awastin’ woman!” he shouted up to her.

She came down tying her hair at the nape of her neck. “I wish I could French braid it, but I don’t know how.”

“Ah, Madame, but you have Jacques here. He is ze best when it comes to ze braiding.” He had quickly turned her around and he deftly divided her hair into three sections and began a simple braid. “Your hair shall be magnifique!”, he gestured with a flair.

She chuckled at his ‘act’ and said, “You are just a man of many secrets.”

“I spent six months at an Artic Station,” he began to explain, “we were snowed in for 8 weeks. Two of the women at the station had long hair and they taught us the fine art of braiding. We became pretty damn good at it. Used to have races, and contests; surprised!”

“Will your wonders never cease? Cook, chauffer, movie critic, connoisseur of fine films, hairstylist, what other hidden talents do you have?”

Oh baby you’d be surprised!

“Like to keep my women guessing; it keeps things exciting.” He finished in minutes and tied the end with the red ribbon she handed him. “There you go. Good job.”

She went into the living room and looked in the mirror. “Wow! This is a great job. No kidding around, this is done really well.”

“Lets go, you can sing my praises in the car.”

“You egotistical, smart-ass!” he was laughing at her and she realized he was pulling her leg. “Seriously, the women back at camp are going to keep you and your men busy when they find out about this. And I’m going to tell them!”

The ‘twins’ were waiting for them in the car. “Go for a ride guys? Oh man they’re getting too spoiled; Michael is going to be very mad at us.” She was smiling, “I love it!”

They made their way to the town center and parked in front of the Library. They went inside and after about an hour Daniel found the section where the maps of the world were kept. It took another hour to find the U.S. maps. From there they were able to find the separate states maps. They laid out California and Daniel bent over the map.

“The beasties were seen last in the San Francisco area. But that was almost 2 yrs ago. They could be anywhere now. You said that Michael reported Lady Jennie might have found a hatching ground. If it proves to be so, why is it so far inland? Why not out on the coast?”

Because Daniel, the males would eat the young; so the females have to hide it from them. Good morning you two!

Good Morning Jake! How are you this morning?

Good mor....ah.....Good Morning Jake. Got to remember to use my mind.

I am fine; and Daniel it will get easier.

I’m just trying to get a feel of the layout of the land from here to California. I know we will be heading that way some day soon. I wanted to get some maps of the area. We need to have a frame of reference when we are flying out there. The lay of the land from above will help us.

This is good Daniel. My Lady, Lady Jennie’s search is over. It is a viable hatching ground. Daniel, your health is much improved. Do you think you will be ready the day after tomorrow to return?

Yes Jake, I believe that we will be ready by then.

Excellent Daniel. My Lady I believe the twins have cornered something under the building. They are barking in that infernal ‘I have something trapped’ tone.

I’ll run down and see what’s going on, Jake. She left the room and took the stairway and went down. She went out the front, seeing nothing she started to circle the building calling for the dogs.

Daniel, you are close to your quest?

Yes Jake, I believe that we shall be one by the time you need us. I’m glad we had that talk last night. Somehow it has helped me to think a lot clearer, to understand some things.

Excellent, excellent! I shall leave you now.

By the time she located the dogs, their barking had turned to growling. She came around the side of the building just in time to see them throw something up in the air. It was a badger, or something like it. It was dead, and they were just tossing it around like a ball. When they saw her they came over to show her their prize. Just then Daniel came around the corner and they rushed to show him also.

“Yeah, wow, good boys. Yes, you’re real good boys.” He looked at her, “Argh, this stinks.”

“Daniel, look at Ash, there’s something else in there.” Kate pointed to Ash, whose tail was wagging rapidly. “Can you take a look? He’s not growling, so whatever it is, it won’t hurt us.”

Daniel got down on his knees and looked thru the opening. He couldn’t see anything under there moving at all. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the dark. There, towards the back wall was a nest of sorts. There were some dead animals, cats, no, kittens. The mother was dead as were two kittens, but there was movement against the wall. He called to Kate to fill her in, “There are kittens down here, I think only one is alive. I’m trying to reach it. Aah..... damn it..... oh shit!”

“Daniel, are you all right? Can I help?” She had bent down to see where he was under the building.

“No, don’t come under here. It’s filthy, there’s God-knows-what under here and I’m crawling in it!” He finally got close enough and reached out and scooped up this little ball of black and white fluff. It mewed piteously. “Got it!” He slowly turned around and eased his way out. He was covered in cobwebs, soot, dirt, and some kind of brown slime. And he also stunk to high heaven.

“Ugh! God, what is that smell?” She was backing away from him holding her nose, and squinting up her face.

“What, no applause for the conquering hero?” he asked mocking her, “I don’t do this sort of stuff for just anybody, you know. And the prize is ...12 ounces of fluff!” He held out the little kitten for her to see. The kitten appeared to be a beautiful black and white Persian mix.

“Aw how cute. Stinky, but cute; and so is the kitten.” She was grinning at him.

“Ah, just what the world needs, one more smart-ass!” He said sardonically.

They checked the kitten to see if it was injured. There were no puncture marks on it. It was about 4 to 6 weeks old, kind of thin, and a female. She was black with white on her belly and paws, and a white diamond on her forehead. “Lets get a box and put her in it. I know the perfect person who would love this little surprise.”

“Sally, of course! Oh Daniel, this would be so perfect. She blames herself for you getting hurt.” He took great delight in her reaction. “This would be the best thing you could do for her.”

“First things first, I’ve got to clean up; I reek of something dead and gooey. Jesus, I’ve got to hose off before I hurl.” He went around to the front of the building and looked for a hose. None could be seen on or near any of the buildings. He looked imploringly at her to help.

“Wait, let me think. Ok, yes I’ve got just the place, come with me, Daniel.” She headed around the building.

One block over was a flower shop. They would have a hose. She went inside and quickly found the main switch and pulled it. Then she turned on the water. After a bit of sputtering and spewing water finally came out of the sink. She then went towards the back and there was a big bin they put flowers in and the hose used to shower them off.

“This might help for the time being till we can get you home. You are not stepping foot in the car smelling like that.”

He climbed in the bin and she hosed down his legs and shoes as best she could. Most of the slime came sliding off. “Hey not too much its cold out there, remember?”

“We’re not five minutes away, Mister, so shake off as much water as you can. You get to ride in the back of the car with the door open.”

“Cruel woman, downright cruel! How’s the fluff ball doing?”

She checked the box, “believe it or not, she’s curled up sound asleep.”

Five minutes later she had him back at the house. He took off his shoes outside on the porch and had no sooner walked inside then the twins grabbed them and took off tossing them into the air, barking.

“I hope they enjoy them,” he said as he headed for the refrigerator, “Whew, I need a coke.”

He opened it and took a long swig and let out a belch.

“Ah...mighty warrior home...dangerous hunt...AARGH!” He was chuckling as he turned and headed for the stairs.

She brought the little kitten into the kitchen and cleaned it up. It really wasn’t too dirty. The mother cat had kept her quite clean. She put down a saucer of milk and the little ball of black and white fur drank greedily. Then she licked her paws, as any proper cat would do, curled her self up and went to sleep again.

She’s so cute, Sally is going to love her, Kate thought to herself. She went to the sink and washed her hands and noticed the coke on the counter. He left his coke. I’ll put it on the dresser for him.

She kicked off her shoes and headed up the stairs. She went to his room, realized he wasn’t there, that he was using her shower. She tiptoed in and opened her dresser draws and got a change of clothes for herself. She went to the bathroom in his room and changed. Then she spotted the coke again.

Shoot, I forgot to leave it for him.

She went back to her room, quietly walked in and froze in mid-step. He was standing on the side of her bed with his back to her. She noted his tight buttocks, strong legs, and muscled back, he was tan and fit, very male. His nakedness evoked an involuntary response from her. She let out a low long trembling breath; she couldn't stop herself from staring; she was totally unprepared for this reaction.

Daniel heard her come in and the fact that she didn't leave gave him hope. He slowly turned around. She was standing there staring at him; her face was beet-red, *she's blushing!* She took a small step forward, hesitated, her breathing was deep, and he heard a shudder emerge from deep in her throat. She ran her tongue over her lips slowly as she stared at his chest. Daniel decided to let her make the first move. She took another step forward and looked him in the eye for what seemed like an eternity. He could see the conflict play across her face. She was deciding; then she backed up a bit, hesitated again for a moment, and quickly turned to leave.

"Don't leave, please," he tried to keep his voice soft and gentle. "You can't run away all your life; things are different now. I just want to hold you in my arms, woman."

She was shaking her head, "you... you don't understand Daniel," she said softly and turned to leave.

He reached out and laid his hand on her arm, "Not all men are bastards; some of us believe that there is no greater gift that a woman can give. I don't know who hurt you, or how they hurt you. But, believe me, I am not that person."

He stepped closer and put his arms around her; she was trembling. He lifted her chin up with his finger and bent his head and kissed her softly on the mouth. Her eyes were wide in surprise as he cradled her head in his hands, and kissed her forehead, her cheeks, and her neck. A sharp intake of breath, and her whole body trembled, a low moan escaped.

She raised her hands, slowly dragged them across his chest, gently combing thru his chest hair with her fingers. A slight smile appeared as her lips parted; and then alarm spread across her face, she stopped suddenly as tho she was caught doing something she shouldn't. She attempted to push away; again she stopped and looked up at him. For the first time he could see the longing, and the frustration reflected in her eyes.

"It's no use..." shaking her head she took a step back and turned and darted down the hall, he heard her running down the stairs and then the back door slammed.

Daniel understood then that someone had hurt her badly, it had left a scar so deep that she was afraid to even try. He dressed quickly and went after her. She wasn't in the backyard, so he sent the 'twins' to find her and followed them. He saw her walking towards downtown. He called to her and she seemed surprised that he had followed her.

"Go away Daniel, don't make me call Jake." She threatened.

"Go ahead, call him..." he dared as he came up to her. He could see that she was on the defensive, but decided to call her bluff anyway. He was going to make her face her fear once and for all.

“I kiss you and you respond with such passion; yet you pull back, turn it off, and run away. What are you afraid of? That I’m going to hurt you? Never! Talk to me woman, please. God, I should be so lucky to have the affections of a woman like you.”

“You don’t understand!” she shouted at him.

“Then tell me!” he shouted right back.

“Look, I’m not very good at this, take my word for it; there is nothing here to pursue. Please Daniel,” she said softly, “don’t push this.”

“No! I’m not giving up on you. I wouldn’t have dreamed of us together if it weren’t true.” Daniel began to get a glimpse of her pain now.

“Daniel, please!” When she spoke again he could hear her agony reflected in her voice. “Look, I can be a strong leader when it comes to running the camp; that’s no problem. But doing what is supposed to come natural to a woman, I... I don’t have a damn clue! I don’t...” she said softly as tears began to flow. “I never had girlfriends to talk to about boys, or sex. I never learned what young girls learn growing up socializing. My first piece of knowledge about boys and sex came when I was 18 – I was raped! Nice beginning, eh?” I guess it warped me somehow.” She looked up at him, “Look, I’m a great one-time fuck... but it stops there; there just isn’t anything else.”

“When I was married I thought I could go to my husband, he would help me for sure. That was a joke! He was an idiot who screwed anything female; for him it was all about the chase. He taught me nothing; he didn’t have a clue. When I pressed for more he laughed at me. When we divorced he said awful things - things that just festered over the years. Told me I was built wrong, could never please a real man; and much worse things. I haven’t had the nerve to pursue a relationship since.” She bent her head and took a deep breath, “I’m so tired of being alone, of not feeling a loving touch Daniel; but I’m terrified of intimacy and what it entails. I’m scared to death to trust someone again; and then be made a fool of. I couldn’t bear to see the look of disappointment on your face Daniel. So please - just let it go!”

“No!” He said forcefully, then in a softer voice, “I’m not going anywhere, and neither are you.” He slowly put his arms around her, gently holding her to him. Stepping back he looked into her eyes, this time he saw the fear. “Whatever he told you was a lie; he was trying to destroy you, probably out of his own guilt. God woman, did you just take his word for it? Geeze, give yourself a break.”

He leaned in and kissed her gently, then with more force exploring her mouth with his tongue, pressing her body to his. She responded by pulling herself to him as her entire body shuddered. As they parted he exclaimed, “Woman, there is nothing wrong with you!”

He took her hand in his and headed back towards the house. Only this time he went to his bedroom. When she started to pull away he turned and faced her.

“Shh...ut-ut! Don’t say a word.” He placed his hand gently on her mouth, “let me show you what pleasure really is.”

Daniel took her in his arms and kissed her again, he caressed her neck, and she trembled and moaned. He lifted her in his arms and laid her on his bed. He began to slowly remove her clothing and she blushed deeply. He continued kissing her, remarking how beautiful she was, how her breasts were magnificent, her legs strong and sexy, all the while looking her in the eye. Ever so slowly she began to relax and respond to him. Daniel slowly caressed her body over and over; exploring her breasts and causing her to shudder and moan several times. He could tell from her responses to his touch that she truly hadn't been sexually active for a very long time.

Not far away large black eyes kept pace with the lovers. Occasionally a chuckle would erupt into the sunny day; and many times, *yes, yes! Let your hearts be joined as one.*

She moaned at his exploration of her body and at one point arched her back and rose up grabbing him in passion. Daniel looked at this woman-child in his arms and marveled. She was delightful, and utterly stubborn, and he soon discovered, a deeply passionate woman. There was so much more to her than he originally thought. He found himself wanting to please her. He brought her to the heights of ecstasy several times taking great pleasure in doing so. He continued to kiss and caress her body as she shuddered at his every touch. And then when he felt she was ready he took her and loved her like he had never done before. His thrusts were not done with a force to dominate, but more with love to please; and in doing so, he found a pleasure he had never known.

She moaned and thrust herself upward to meet him, her passion overtaking her. Daniel could see that she was close to an orgasm. He rose forward, and pulled her to him, keeping pace with her. There was electricity in the air. Suddenly she moaned and arched her back, leaning into him. He too suddenly felt the rising tide and it surprised him with its intensity; he realized that he had never experienced anything as strong as this. They came together in a rhythm that reached a crescendo and they both yelled out.

“Daniel!” Kate yelled in surprise.

“Oh God, Kate!” He shouted.

There was a clap of thunder, and a beam of bright light shot thru them both and thru the entire room. They were engulfed in its warmth and it bonded them to each other in love.

Outside, they both heard the throaty roar of two dragons signaling their orgasmic release.

They clung to each other tightly; she was still trembling in his arms, her passion so intense. He held her to him in gratitude and whispered in her ear, “Kate, this is what making love is about, this is the pleasure you give to each other. Thank you for this amazing, beautiful gift.”

He was holding her to him when he was suddenly aware, with crystal clarity, that he loved this woman; loved her more than life itself. She filled his heart, and he could see his future, with her by his side. He didn’t want to let her go. Exhaustion finally forced him to lay her down, and he lay beside her. Her face told him what he needed to know. She was looking at him with so much love that you almost touch it. He leaned over her and kissed her on the forehead, and then gently on the mouth.

“There is nothing wrong with you woman. I find myself saying something I have never said before; that I’ve never felt before.” He was looking into her eyes. “I love you Kate, with everything I have.”

“Thank you for not giving up on me Daniel. I... I never knew it could be like this, never knew there was such joy.” She caressed the side of his face; “I’ve been in love with you for a long time Daniel, I’m not afraid to say it, not anymore.”

She lay beside him, her hand rubbing across his chest. Finally he asked her, “What is it about my chest, woman?”

“I’m sorry; if it upsets you I’ll stop.” She was looking up at him wide eyed.

“No, no; if it pleases you do continue.” He was smiling at her childlike actions.

“I just find your chest hair so irresistibly sexy; I can’t keep my hands off,” she cooed softly.

He felt empowered; she made him feel like a king. He had taken a situation that had almost turned into a disaster and turned it into a positive thing for her. And he suddenly realized that in helping her, he had helped himself. They lay there for sometime in each other’s arms, just enjoying the feel of the other. She dozed off curled against him. It was quiet and peaceful as he let his mind wander.

I could lie like this all night. Hey Jake? I love her. Do you hear me Jake? I love her!

Yes Daniel, I hear you. I am pleased in your happiness.

Thank you Jake, you knew all along that this would happen, didn’t you?

I knew that you needed her just as much as she needed you. I knew that if ever there was a person to bring her out of her pain; it was you. You are both happy, that is all that is important.

This was supposed to happen all along, right Jake? Only neither of us realized how we would be affected, and how our futures were so entwined. But you knew all along. And now I get the feeling that there is much more to this, we are only the beginning.

Jake chuckled; your logic has taken you to the correct conclusion. There is time for explanations later. Right now enjoy each other and your time together. I shall leave you both to enjoy your privacy.

After about a half hour Daniel’s stomach growled loudly. *We need food.* Daniel burst out with, “I’m starving! I could use a drink, and some food. How about you sleepy head?” he asked gently shaking her shoulder.

“Mmm...come to think of it, yes, I’m hungry too!” She stretched her body seductively and looked up at him, smiling.

“Its good lovemaking woman, we need to fortify ourselves for round two!”

“Round two?” Her eyes widened questionably.

“Ah yes my good woman, I intend to ravish you again!”

“Oh Daniel,” she said in a deep husky voice, “I can hardly wait.”

Daniel was surprised at his reaction; the ‘General’ was stirring back to life. *No, no; food first, “Do not tempt me woman, food and drink first. Then if you are a good girl, I shall introduce you to the ‘General’ again.”*

She quickly sat up with a grin on her face, “Oh really?” She looked at him a long time and then smiled seductively, “whatever you say my liege.”

He burst out laughing and kissed her and then went into the bathroom to shower.

Mmmm She thought to herself as she lay there. Jake? Jake do you feel how happy I am? How much I love this man?

I can feel it My Lady, I am happy for you both. Your coming together was a momentous occasion. Lady Jennie and I saluted you both.

I heard you, and it pleased me very much.

And when he reached his orgasm your name was revealed to him, just as your dreams predicted. Now do you believe that he is the one for you? Your dreams have been fulfilled.

Yes Jake, they have been, my friend.

Kate was lying there dreamily running her hand over her body when she heard Daniel finish in the shower. She got up as Daniel came out of the shower; and as she passed him to go in herself, he reached out and grabbed her and kissed her passionately.

“Woman, I love you!” He said spinning her around.

She went in and showered. When she emerged he had already gone downstairs. She heard him rummaging about as she entered the kitchen.

“I have the fire going, I just need to get the steaks out, I’ll need a pair of tongs. Do you know where they are?”

“Look above you, they are hanging with the other utensils,” she was pointing above the stove. He grabbed it and went outside to check the fire. She turned on the oven and then prepared the potatoes for baking. Then she got out the corn, filled a large pot with water and set it on the stove to boil.

We need some music! She went in the living room and put on some Keiko Matsui, the house was soon filled with soothing music.

He came inside and took the steaks out of the refrigerator and dumped them on a large platter. He then turned around and went over to her and kissed her on the neck. She jumped and dropped an ear of corn. "Daniel!" He was grinning at her. "Two can play that game, Mister!" She told him feigning anger.

"I look forward to it, my love," he dared her.

He put the steaks on and the aroma called the twins back to the house. They came bounding around the side of the house and almost upset the grill. She watched from inside as he gave them a lecture fully expecting them to understand what he was saying. And they did!

She finished the corn, and an hour later the potatoes were ready. She set the table and got everything out and on it just in time as he came in with a platter of steaks. Their aroma filled the house and they both dug in like a pack of ravenous wolves. He was eating his corn, fingers dripping with butter when she reached under the table and gave him a loving squeeze. He jumped and almost choked on a kernel of corn.

"My God woman! You could give a man a little warning!"

"I told you two could play," she said in a low deep voice, smiling.

"Ah, are you challenging me woman? It would not be wise," he said smiling at her lovingly.

"Oh I am so scared," she pretended.

"I'll take care of you later missy." He was grinning at her now.

"I'm counting on it!" Her eyes wide, it was her turn to grin at him.

They finished their meal and cleaned up. She had just finished drying the last dish when he grabbed their windbreakers and asked, "... want to go for a quick walk to help digest dinner?"

"Sounds great," she whistled and the twins came running, bounding out the door into the night barking all the way.

They walked a couple of blocks holding hands; a cool wind was blowing ruffling their hair. Kate was thinking about going back to camp early when Daniel blurted out; "Say, do you want to go back to camp tomorrow? I mean, I wouldn't mind going back tomorrow afternoon."

"You have to stop reading my mind like that, it's getting downright spooky." She thought for a few minutes, "we'd have to close down the house, empty the refrigerator of everything. Strip the beds and wash all the linens and towels. Sure, I think we can be ready by early afternoon."

They walked in silence for a few more blocks and then Kate turned towards Daniel; she took his hand and held it to her breast. "Are you sure about this Daniel? Are you sure you really want..."

He quickly placed his hand on her mouth, "...hush woman! I have never been so sure of something in my entire life. You are my future; it's as simple as that. You're in my blood woman!"

They headed back towards the house planning their course of action in the morning. As they came up the stairs, they stopped, turned towards each other and wondered aloud, when they would be able to return to this place. They both knew it would most probably be a year or more.

“Then let’s make this last night count, let’s make it a night to remember!” Kate said coyly.

He picked her up in his arms and carried her inside. “I’m so lucky to have found you.” As he kissed her he silently thanked Jake for bringing them together.

They barely made it up the stairs to the bedroom before their clothes were off and they were at each other. He worked her body like a fine tuned instrument. He loved watching her tremble at his touch. He brought her to the heights of ecstasy again taking great joy in her utter pleasure. She was such a novice at lovemaking that any action on her part brought about great gasps and shudders, and it made him all the more excited. She wanted to give him pleasure also, and so he taught her how. Her surprise when he would react to her touch was a delight to him. She was red faced and shy, but he showed her how happy she made him. Her fascination with his chest continued to give her pleasure, and mystify him. He found he didn’t want it to end; he couldn’t get enough of her. After several hours they fell asleep in each other’s arms, totally spent.

And outside the dragons keened and roared their approval.

Jake saw the future starting to take shape. *We are now ready to begin - again!*

**GATHERING
AND
EMERGENCE**

As the sun rose over the mountaintop Daniel woke feeling refreshed and energized. He turned and saw that Kate was curled up, pressed to his side. He lay there watching her sleep, soaking in the scent of her, and remembering the evening before. He couldn't believe how content he was, how everything had come together so perfectly. Not many men get to find their soul mate, especially in these crazy times. She stretched, arched her back and rolled over opening her eyes and smiling up at him. She scooted over and laid her head on his chest, giving him a quick squeeze. She told him she wanted to make sure all this was real. He assured her it was and proceeded to show her just how real. She protested that they had to get up; they had so much to do. He kissed her softly on the forehead and informed her that this is what is referred to as 'love-play', and there was nothing more important. Then he began to love her again, and she dropped all of her arguments quickly.

As they lay there in each other's arms they began to talk of their lives before 'the burning'. Both had been lonely, searching for something. Both had felt that there was something 'more' in life waiting for them. The more they spoke, the more they saw how alike they were, which at times both found kind of spooky. They were comfortable with each other, holding nothing back. Daniel had always felt in the back of his mind that he was being molded, that his 'metal' was being tested for some task; he apologized for not being able to explain it right. Kate said she understood completely; she kept wondering if she was guilty of vanity because she had thought the same thing. It was during this time that Daniel asked Kate to marry him. She said yes, immediately; and then laughed and told him that there were no preachers in camp. After an hour they finally rose to face the day.

They began preparing for their departure, anxious to return to the camp. Everything was stripped and washed and stored away. Their clothing was washed and packed in duffle bags. Everything in the house pantry was cleaned out and extras would be brought back with them to the camp. She called Jake and told him they wanted to return early. Jake was very happy that they were ready to return. He was anxious to go after his Queen. And now that she and Daniel were together, there was no reason to delay.

Daniel wanted to make a last run to the warehouse, but he wouldn't say why. She decided this might be a good idea after all. She could get some things for Sally, for the kitten. She would need kitten food, litter and litter box, clippers, and a brush. They headed over to the center early and went their separate ways meeting back at the door in half an hour. Daniel came back whistling to himself; he had that Cheshire cat grin on his face, something was going on. He wouldn't tell her anything no matter how she tried to get him to talk - and she really tried!

They were back at the house by mid-morning. They discussed what to do about the car, how to store it so the battery wouldn't go bad. In the end they set it up on blocks in the garage, and removed the battery, drained it and stored it on a shelf.

Kate hastily taught Daniel some dragon etiquette and advised him that politeness is a major item with the dragons. She also told him that female dragons appeared to be extremely vain - if Lady Jennie was any indicator.

The twins sensed that they were going 'home' and they became very excited, running about and growling. They would grab something and run off with Daniel chasing them, shouting obscenities. A couple of hours later they began barking and running in and out of the house, slamming the door.

We are here My Lady, and the twins are greeting us. Jake informed Kate.

Kate yelled upstairs to Daniel that Jake was here. He came down the stairs and grabbed her and kissed her excitedly and then took her hand in his, “well woman, here we go!” They took off out the back door together and came running around the house to the open field just as Jake was landing.

The sight of Jake took Daniel by surprise and he stopped short, *my God... so big*, ran thru his mind. He bowed to show acknowledgement and respect, as Kate had instructed him, *Good Morning Jake*, he sent out in his thoughts. He watched as Kate ran to the large dragon and threw her arms around his huge head.

Good Morning Daniel, you look well. Jake greeted him with a nod of his massive head, *your spirit glows brightly with happiness.*

I am happy Jake, thanks to you. Daniel stepped forward a little hesitantly and stroked the large dragon on the side of his massive head. *You take some getting used to.* Jake chuckled loudly in reply, and Daniel received a small shock.

Daniel saw Michael descending on a huge creamy brown dragon; he knew this must be Lady Jennie. He went over to them and made a big show of bowing to Lady Jennie with a grand flourish, *Good morning Lady Jennie, my but you are a beauty. You sparkle in the sunlight like a beautiful diamond.* She twirled her eyes wide and bowed her head to him in acknowledgement, keening approval.

“Well that’s it for me!” Michael admonished him sliding down from her neck, “she’s going to be impossible to live with now. Between you and Steve, she is spoiled rotten.” He laughed loudly, “by the way, she approves of your salutation; politeness and manners are most important to dragons.” Knowing now exactly who Michael was, Daniel marveled at the young man making his way towards him. He was still laughing as he came up to Daniel, and took him by the forearm in a greeting of equals. “Good to see you healthy and strong again Daniel, you had us scared there for a while.”

“Michael... good to see you. Listen, I, I want to say thanks for all”

“Daniel,” he interrupted holding his hands up, “don’t even go there. You’re family now, or soon will be,” he whispered. “Jake told me of you little plan, I think it’s great!” He went over to Kate and gave her a big hug and kiss and swung her around, “My, my, you absolutely glow lady, he’s obviously very good for you!”

“Michael! She was blushing bright red. “Good God, do I have no secrets?”

“You know the answer to that better than most,” Michael laughed thinking; *It’s good to see her so happy.*

“So young man, how are things at the camp?” She slid her arm in his and led him around the side of the house rattling off a series of questions. The ‘twins’ followed, calling to their master in jubilation.

Daniel moved closer to Jake. *I’ve got the rings Jake. Can we do this at sunset on the ridge?*

I see no reason why not. Sam and Lucy are very excited to be included. Steve has agreed also, and he is bringing Lady Ashley! She will be one of the new riders. Lady Jennie is honored that you asked her to be present. Daniel, I do not see the need for any of this. My Lady is your Lady Kate now, and you are her mate. There is no doubt.

Jake, it’s something we humans do, trust me.

Ah, you must have a ceremony to announce to all the others that she is your woman. Jake twirled his eyes and stared at Daniel, very primitive!

Hey, cut us some slack here big guy. With that Jake roared ‘approval’, and chuckled as Daniel continued, so Jake, am I riding back with Kate, on you?

Actually Daniel, I was going to hang you from my right claw. Jake tilted his head back and roared.

Daniel was shocked for a moment and then got it... Good God, you made a joke, Daniel laughed and patted him on the neck, I don’t believe it.

OK, you two, lets get this show on the road.

Kate had come back around the house carrying the box with the kitten. Michael had their duffel bags. She set it down and explained to Jake and Lady Jennie how they had found it, and about how old it was. They both sniffed it, Jake blowing on it his approval. Lady Jennie thought it was cute; she wanted to know if it would talk. She was disappointed to find that it was incapable of speech. The kitten seemed unfazed by all of the attention.

They threw their duffel bags over Jake’s mid section, and Kate climbed on. She held onto the box with the kitten and set it between two ridges on Jakes neck in front of her. Daniel was excited as he climbed up behind Kate and settled himself. He held on to her waist and gave her a tight squeeze.

Michael loaded the extras they had, and then introduced the ‘twins’ to the new holders that Steve had designed for them. The device fit around Lady Jennie’s neck and hung down just in front of her wings; so as not to interfere with her flying. They each sat on one side of Lady Jennie’s neck just in front of Michael. He strapped them down and they were barking their approval loudly.

They had better not bark all the way home Michael, or I shall drop them, Lady Jennie told him.

Michael spoke to them and they soon quieted. Lady Jennie and I are ready to go Jake, see you there! They lifted off gracefully, banked to the right, and headed for the mountains. Daniel watched as they gained altitude.

What a beautiful sight! My God she is so graceful. Jake began to move, Whoa...!

Jake extended his wings took one leap and he was airborne. He circled the house and the surrounding town and ascended gradually heading for the mountains. Daniel was in heaven, he was holding on to Kate, and also to the ridge on Jakes neck. It was very cold, he was glad he had worn the leather jacket as Kate had suggested. He took in the layout of the town and the house and the warehouses.

Jake, this is fantastic! Daniel was beside himself with joy at flying on the large dragon.

I am pleased that you are enjoying the ride Daniel. Jake turned his massive head around and looked at Daniel, soon you will be doing this on my lovely Queen.

And I can hardly wait for that to happen Jake, Daniel answered solemnly. There’s the forest that surrounds our mountain. Look, there’s the river that flows from the waterfall... I can see the camp! Woo-wee...this is kick-ass! There are the fields, and the horse pen, and the south ridge. Jake, this is so cool! Jake was enjoying Daniel’s exuberance, as was Kate.

My lady, Daniel is truly enjoying the ride; his enthusiasm warms my heart. He will make an excellent leader for the community. They will follow him without question. Jake threw his head up and let out a long plume of fire and uttered a loud roar of ‘approval’.

Minutes later Jake glided onto the mountaintop. Daniel was sorry to see it end; he had to admit to himself that he wanted more. He saw Steve waiting by a large boulder, and watched as he came forward as they landed. Daniel climbed down and turned to offer his hand to Kate. She handed him the box with the kitten first, and then she climbed down. She immediately went to Jake and stroked the side of his nose and had a few words with him. Then she hugged and thanked him for the ride.

Steve greeted Daniel with a big bear hug. “You had us so worried, damn, you look great!” He elbowed Daniel and said slyly, “Do I detect a certain look of contentment? ”

Kate left Jake and greeted Steve with a big hug. “How are you Steve? Michael says we have some candidates?”

“Kate, my, my,” Steve stepped back and held her hands looking at her. He chuckled loudly, “lady I have to say you’re absolutely glowing!”

She blushed and went to Daniel’s side and he took her hand in his. She took the box from him and held it out for Steve to see.

He gave her a devilish smile and reached for the box. “What’s this, oh a kitten; bet I know who is going to get this!”

Daniel took the box; “A little gift for Sally from me! We found her under a building, only one left alive.” Daniel handed the box back to Kate. “And by the way, I’ve got a bone to pick with you mister!” Daniel stepped forward towering over Steve, “you knew all about Jake and didn’t tell me?”

Steve gave a chuckle, “I knew you’d be mad when you found out, but I couldn’t tell you Daniel. Jake said I couldn’t, and I wasn’t about to go against his wishes; if you know what I mean.”

“Now Daniel,” Kate cut in quickly, “don’t be too harsh on him. He figured it out all by himself. I came up here one night to see Jake, and there he was, sitting there chatting away having a heart-to-heart. He had this stupid grin on his face. Jake loved it, he even gave Steve a ride!”

“Oh yeah man, out of sight!” Steve turned and bowed to Jake with an exaggerated wave of the hand. *Good morning Jake!*

Master Steve, good morning, Jake replied nodding to Steve.

Daniel continued, “That was the morning you came into the mess hall and you were acting all weird. And I just figured that maybe Ashley and you had gotten together. So everybody knew – even Jerry too?” Daniel scratched his head as they nodded yes, “Damn, I was the last to find out wasn’t I?”

“Maybe if you weren’t so hardheaded it would have been sooner.” Steve was teasing him now, “it was right in front of you, man, and you just couldn’t see it!” They shook hands and Steve pounded Daniel’s back as they joked with each other about how dense they were.

Kate came over and broke it up. “Lets go down and settle our things, Daniel. We can drop off our luggage and then go see Sam and Lucy.”

They went down thru the mountain and followed the pathway that led to Kate’s cave. Daniel tossed the duffel bags on the king size bed and looked around.

“Steve, think you could make this a little larger? And maybe give me an extra room over there, for a small office.”

“Sure, let me and Jerry look it over first, and I’ll get back to you. Want to make sure we don’t cut into any steam vents. Oh that’s right, you guys don’t know....” he stepped back and looked at them both.

“Don’t know what?” Daniel and Kate asked in unison.

“Well, Jerry and I were checking out a large cave for Jake. We’re going to use it as a hatching area, and we found a thermal vent under the surface about 15 feet. So we made an opening and then piped it in and under the hatching grounds, the little dragons are gonna be just fine this winter.”

He was very pleased with himself at this, “we also found other areas on the mountain, deep inside. So we figured we could give everybody heat this winter. It all started because we were looking for a way to rig up toilets and showers up here. We were going to pipe in the water and surprise everyone. We already did it down below, man do they love us!”

“I’ll bet they do!” Kate said enthusiastically. She was glad that Steve and Jerry had been thinking about the community. It showed them to be the leaders that Jake said they were.

“The women are all over Jerry. Dan, remember how shy he used to be around women. Ha! Not anymore, and he’s loving all the attention.”

“And you?” Daniel asked.

“Nope, got something a lot better brewing and I’m not going to mess this up for anything. An easy piece of tail is not worth losing Ashley over. We are so close to finally getting together that I don’t want to even think about doing something stupid like that.” he was very serious. **“She’s going to be my future, Dan, and I don’t want to screw it up and lose her.”**

“I know what you mean, but I’ll tell you a secret. Once you do get together, you won’t even think about something like that. You’ll be happy in a way I can’t even put words to.” Daniel turned and stared at Kate, **“you’ll know you have something most people just dream about.”**

Kate lifted her head and looked questioningly at Daniel, then her eyes went wide and she began to turn a bright red. Daniel walked over to her, took her in his arms and gently stroked the side of her cheek. His memory filled with thoughts of the night before; he pulled her to him kissed her passionately. Kate uttered a husky, “Oh Daniel!” Her arms went around his neck and they embraced and kissed again.

“All right you two,” Steve was a little uncomfortable, and surprised at Daniels spontaneity; but more surprised at Kate’s response, **“hey, enough, enough!”** In a way it was kind of nice to see that Kate and Daniel were human after all, he was really happy for them. **“Let’s get going guys; it’s getting too hot in here!”** They all laughed and headed down to the camp below. Just as they were stepping off the mountain path, Sally came skipping out of the Great Hall. She took one look, squealed and rushed across the pathway into Daniel’s open arms.

“Oh Daniel I’m so happy to see you! You’re all right! I was so worried about you! I prayed for you every day.” She was hugging him and chattering on and on. Totally unlike that shy quiet little girl he remembered.

“Whoa, slow down a bit little one. I’m just fine, I promise you. I heard how worried you were about me.” Kate handed him the box and Daniel went down on one knee and gave it to Sally. **“Well, I’ve got something here we found; and I thought to myself that only one person I know would like this, you!”**

She looked in the box and let out a squeal, “Oh Daniel! Oh she’s beautiful! Is she a she? Oh she’s so fluffy! Look how pretty she is; can I name her? Oh she’s wonderful! I’ll call her Oreo!” She hugged Daniel and Kate, over and over. “Thank you so much,” she said as she ran off to show Sam and Lucy.

“I think you made someone very happy!” Jerry had come up behind them and watched the whole thing. “Nice to see that you’re still with us Daniel,” they shook hands, and he tipped his cap to Kate.

“Hello Jerry,” said Kate warmly, “I understand that we have a lot to thank you for. You and Steve have been very busy since we’ve been gone.” She was trying to put him at ease. He was always a little jumpy around her and she didn’t know why.

Strong independent women always made Jerry nervous. “Yes ma’am, we thought we’d surprise everyone with hot water. Jake was the one who spotted the steam vent. I hope you don’t mind, but he took me up to show me where it was located so we could put the charges in the right place.”

“Jake is his own man Jerry, he can take whoever he wants for a ride,” she said with a smile.

“Well, we figure that it would take about a week or two; then the whole camp would have hot water. I wasn’t sure if you would want us to hold off; you know, go get the eggs first before we started all that work.” He was hedging to see if she approved.

“Daniel, what do you think?” Turning around she asked, “Should we get the eggs first, or wait a bit?”

Daniel’s response was what she knew it would be; “Eggs first, we can’t take a chance that they might be destroyed.”

Jerry was surprised that she had deferred to Daniel. *Things have changed.*

“Why don’t we get all the rider candidates together tomorrow morning and then plan it out and go right then to get the eggs, while we’re all together,” Daniel suggested.

“That would probably be best; we’ll all be well rested and ready. So be it.” She replied and then added; “now, lets go see Sam and Lucy.” She quickened her pace towards the Hall.

“Well that was close,” said Steve, “she almost ruined your little surprise.” He raised his eyebrows up and down as he walked past Daniel grinning.

Daniel caught up with Kate and they entered the Hall holding hands. There was an immediate ‘Hey look who’s back’ from everyone in the Hall. And the fact that they were holding hands was not lost on anyone. Sam and Lucy came up to them and there were a lot of hugs, and ‘glad to see you’re ok’ and ‘we missed you’. Lucy gave Daniel a huge hug and a special thank-you for making Sally so happy.

Sam pulled Kate aside and gave her his choices for riders. “I think they will do real well.”

She read the list and was surprised at some of the names. “I know that maybe Jeff is a little long in the tooth, but he has a great mind for strategy. We play chess quite a bit, and he’s very good. He would be a good advisor for our future endeavors. And with the enhancement and all, he’ll shape up real nice.”

“Sam, you did a wonderful job, your choices are very good. And I’m glad to see that Ashley is among them. She has really come a long way from that frightened little teenager.” She smiled at him and they linked arms and turned around and headed back to the main group.

As they approached, Kate watched Daniel work the crowd. He would look over at her every now and then and smile. Sam could see that there was a bond between them that had become very strong.

“Well now, you wear it well girl,” he whispered to her. She looked at him questioningly, and Sam tilted his head towards Daniel. “I knew when the right man came along, you would find happiness; my dreams told me that much. Katie-girl I’m happy for you both!” He gave her a big bear hug.

“You’re going to squish me Sam!” Kate was grinning at him, she hugged him back. “I love you too, you big lug!”

Big John came into the Hall and went right up to Kate, swept her up in his arms and swung her around. He gave her a huge hug; “Word gets around here pretty quick,” he said with a twinkle in his eye, “I’m so happy for you Kate. Does the big lug know how lucky he is?”

Kate was smiling at the open display of affection from Big John, “yes John, he knows. And for your information, I’m pretty lucky too!”

Ashley came into the Hall looked around at all the commotion and spotted Kate. She worked her way thru the crowd of people and went over to her quickly. “Welcome back, I’m glad to see you.” She gave her a hug and continued, “so tell me, how is he doing?”

“See for yourself.” She pointed to where Daniel was amid a crowd of people, talking and gesturing wildly. He looked up just then and stared at Kate. They connected again and slowly smiled at each other. The intensity of their stares told Ashley everything. She was quick to pick up on it.

“Oh my gosh, you two are in love!” she whispered. “Oh, I’m so happy for you, Kate.” She took Kate’s hand and guided her to a table and they sat down. “To tell the truth, I think I’m falling for Steve. But I want to be sure I’m not making an utter fool of myself. I’d hate for that to happen. How do you know that this is the one? When its real love?”

“Ashley, follow your dreams and your heart.” She held her at arms length and shook her shoulders, “you know he is the one! And I know for sure that he’s mad for you! But I haven’t said a thing, not a word came from my lips!” She was smiling at her.

“Thanks Kate, that’s what I needed. I’m going to tell Steve tonight. I’ll probably scare the hell out of the poor guy! Wish me luck!” She gave her a hug and was off again.

Later in the afternoon as it was getting close to dinnertime, the Hall began to fill with people again. They were all happy to hear that Kate and Daniel were back, and that he was well once again. They kept Daniel busy for some time recanting the tale of his short, but mighty battle with the mutant ‘bear-thing’. Sam finally rang the dinner bell and everyone filed thru the dinner line and found a seat. Kate was starving, but she waited till the line had slowed a bit. She took this time to locate Jeffery; then she went and got herself a plate of food. She glided her way around the great Hall and went over to where Jeffery was sitting and asked to join him. He was quite surprised and possibly a little flattered.

“I am glad to hear that Daniel has returned to us well. We all missed him; he is a hard worker and contributes to us all.” Jeffery rose to get himself a drink, “May I get you a drink my Lady?”

“Thank you Professor, an ice tea would be great. And Professor – it’s Kate to you,” she smiled sweetly at him.

Jeff was in his early 70’s, about 5’11”, gray hair, a thin face with a small gray mustache, his frame was not large, but not really slim either. He had taught History to college students for 30 years. His wife was lost in the first wave of attacks. He wandered into camp one day with several other people. He was quiet and shy, but had a quick mind. He had discovered Jake one week after he arrived at the camp. They had been friends ever since. He contributed a lot in the planning of the community and the rules that they had set up. He came back to the table with their drinks, and after sitting down asked “So what do you wish to ask me? And you may call me Jeff, please.”

There was no wool over his eyes so Kate went right to the point, “Jeff, would you consider becoming a dragon rider?”

He pondered her question for a time and then choosing his words carefully, he answered her, “I am going to assume that Sam presented me as a candidate. Kate, I have no dreams of riding a dragon; I can’t even imagine myself doing so. But I do see myself amongst them, and all of you.”

“You see yourself with us, but not as a rider, hmm...” she was pondering his response, “Jeff, perhaps you could be our advisor. You know, the one who can ‘see the forest amongst the trees’. Sam said you had a very good head on your shoulders. We are going to need someone who can see through to the truth of things, someone who has a head for planning and strategy. Do you think you might be interested?” She waited for his reply.

“Very interested, and honored that you’d think an old history professor could contribute something to the effort. Kate, I’ve known for a long time now that something very big looms on the horizon for all us. Jake won’t tell me anything right now, says I have to wait a bit more before he can answer my questions.” He finished his meal, and told her he would be at her service.

“We’ll meet here for breakfast in the morning; all the other candidates will be here too. Then we’ll all go above to meet with Jake.” Kate gently squeezed Jeff’s arm, “Thank you, Jeff.” He finished his meal, and told her he would be at her service. He got up and half-bowed to her before leaving, more as a courtesy. He was forever the southern gentleman; Kate headed towards Daniel smiling.

As she approached, Daniel turned and watched her move among the throng of people, stopping here and there to say a word or two to each one. He could see why she was so loved by everyone.

Daniel disengaged himself from the crowd of people and came to her side, “so what’s going on woman, you have a very satisfied look on your face. What have you been up to?”

“I’m just planning a meeting for tomorrow morning with of all the rider candidates. Sam gave me an impressive list, but I believe he missed by one.”

“What do you mean?” He asked.

She told him of her meeting with Jeffery. “The professor is not interested in being a rider; an advisor yes, but not a rider. Now we are going to be off by one male rider. Can you think of anyone?”

“Mmmm,” he was holding his chin thinking, “what about the young kid that helps in the kitchen. I know he doesn’t want to be doing that kind of work. But he says that it’s a good job if you want to pick up information. He hears about everything going on in the camp.

Neither of you do anything just yet, I will explain later. Jake interjected.

Ok Jake, no problem. Daniel answered for both of them.

“I need to speak to Becky too, she was on the list.” She lowered her voice as she passed Daniel and leaned close, pressing her breast against his arm, “...I’ll see you later ... lover-boy!”

Daniel’s eyes got big, and to her surprise, he spun around, took her in his arms quickly and leaning her over backwards kissed her, right there in front of everyone! She turned red as a beet, and then smiled as he let her go. “I’ll finish that later woman,” he loudly boasted with a wink as he walked away.

“Promises, promises!” She retorted with a sultry smile, and turned and went to look for Becky.

The entire hall let out a loud.... “Woo-woo!” There were several wolf whistles.

Daniel’s stature among the men of the community had just gone up about 100 percent. No one could believe what he had just done. When Michael quickly came over to Daniel, they all assumed that there was going to be a fight. They were quite surprised when he slapped Daniel on the back, said something, and they both exploded in laughter. Things were changing quickly; it seemed that maybe Daniel was in charge now.

Steve and Jerry came over to Daniel and greeted Michael and then both exploded in laughter. “I don’t believe you did that, are you crazy?” Steve whistled lowly.

“It was good for her,” Daniel answered quickly.

Michael came to his defense gleefully, “puts a little spice in her life!” He was looking at them both. “What? Listen, if it wasn’t for that woman, I’d be dead. She kept me going when I didn’t want to do anything but die. She got us all here, she pushed the envelope to keep us alive; and she was an old woman. If it weren’t for her... there would be no dragons! So now she gets her reward; I’m glad for her, she deserves to be happy.”

“No one is disagreeing with you Michael. She does deserve to be happy, and I’m going to see to it personally!” Daniel said with a devilish grin.

“She is one of a kind; I have never met anyone like her. And she has other talents which I won’t go into, wouldn’t want to make you guys blush!” They all broke into laughter.

Big John slowly walked over and the whole room got quiet. Everyone knew how much he respected Kate. There had been speculation at one time about their relationship, but he would have none of the gossip around camp. He marched up to Daniel and stared him eye to eye.

“You must love her very much to do that in front of all of us.” Every one waited for the explosion. Then he grinned at Daniel, “either that or you’ve got a death wish!” They all burst out laughing. Big John grabbed Daniel’s hand in a shake that united them as equals. He had heard of Daniels’s plan for the evening thru Jake. He was honored that he had been asked to attend.

Daniel asked in a whisper, “is everything ready for tonight?” Heads nodded yes. “I thought that you might bring her up to the top Michael. She still doesn’t suspect anything,” they were like a bunch of conspirators.

Sam came up to them, “you men are the envy of the Hall. They are all looking at you with new respect Daniel. What can I say, you’re a crazy man!” He let out a huge belly laugh. “I would never have the nerve to do something like that to Lucy.”

“That’s cause Lucy would hit you with a frying pan! And you know it!” Michael said laughingly.

Across the room Kate was enjoying the display of affection towards Daniel by all the men. She was pleased that Big John had accepted Daniel. His friendship was one she treasured. They all needed a man to look up to, and Daniel was perfect. Oh but she was going to get him later for that little stunt!

She saw Becky sitting with some of the other young women. When they saw her approach they stopped talking. “It’s ok girls, he’s impossible to control when he gets riled up! I’m not too concerned about it,” she said very matter of fact.

“I think it was so romantic! My God, how sexy can you get!” said Susan, a rather good looking blonde with an ample figure that left no doubt about its availability. Every society had women like Susan; we call them whores, and prostitutes. They offered their charms to men for a price. Susan made the choice to be that way. We are what we are, and no blame was held by anyone in camp. Kate would not allow it.

Becky answered her, “Did you see the way he looked at Kate all during dinner and after, it was love; he truly loves her. He does, right Kate?” She was looking at Kate with new eyes, new respect, for this woman who saved them all.

She wasn’t a cold unfeeling bitch after all; she was a lot more. Maybe she had misjudged her all along. It would take a very strong person to run this camp as smooth as she had; you couldn’t afford to be sentimental about things when there are over 100 lives riding on your decisions.

Kate came over to Becky and sat down. “Yes Becky, he does, and I love him.” Smiling she looked at these women and saw the longing in their eyes. They wanted the same thing.

“I’d like to talk with you Becky, alone if I may?” Kate asked her to walk with her for a bit. They left the Hall and walked the camp, and Kate began to feel her out. She wanted to see if she was made of the right stuff to be a rider. She was one of the few who had not met or spoken with Jake.

Becky was a lovely young woman. She was about 24, brown hair, tan, smooth complexion, big brown eyes. She stood about 5'5", a cute 'rounded' figure. She was a hard worker, but she didn't just follow blindly; she also questioned things. She didn't speak of her dreams too often, preferring to keep them to herself. A private treasure she shared with no one.

"Becky, I have to ask you some questions about your dreams. I am not trying to pry, but I have to know something. It is very important." Becky stopped walking and looked at Kate. "Do you ever dream of flying on a dragon - a very special dragon?"

Becky's eyes got very wide, "how did you know about that? I've told no one. I thought it was a wishful daydream that I was including in my dreams."

"It's not Becky; it's a vision of the future. We are going for some eggs tomorrow. We need six rider candidates. Your name has come up as a possible rider, are you interested?" Kate carefully watched to see her reaction.

Becky knew that this was a once in a lifetime opportunity. She had spent her whole life being the quiet little woman, letting life pass her by. Well, she wasn't going to sit by the sidelines any more. "Damn right I'm interested! You can count on me!" She said with such force that she surprised herself.

"Good! That's what I like to see, lots of enthusiasm! Becky, you've never formally met Jake, have you?" She shook her head no, eyes wide with anticipation. "Would you like to pay your respects now?" Big nod yes. "We will be meeting tomorrow morning at breakfast with all the rider candidates; and then we'll go up the mountain to meet with Jake."

My Lady I am flying patrol around the area. I could land in the field by the waterfall if you like.

You don't mind Jake? I think this is needed right now.

I shall be there waiting for you both.

"Jake is flying patrol, he'll meet us in the field by the waterfall. Let's go quickly." She took Becky's arm and they both headed towards the field.

As they approached the field, Becky saw Jake up close for the first time. He was landing, and stretched to his full height, wings extended out.

There was a sharp intake of breath, "Oh my, he's beautiful!"

She has very good taste My Lady!

You behave! "Becky, Jake has to have your permission to be able to speak with you the first time. He is not allowed to enter your mind without it. It would be uncivilized for a dragon to do that, do you willingly give it?"

"Oh yes! How do I speak with him?" She was enraptured watching Jake.

"Use your mind. Just think what you want to say and he will answer you. This is how you will communicate with your own dragon."

Jake? I, I am so pleased to meet you! You are... so big... so fantastic!

Yes I am Lady Becky! And you shall have a fine dragon yourself; a dark blue I believe, with silver ridges!

You've seen him too? Oh I've dreamt about him for so long. I couldn't believe that it could be possible for someone like me to have so beautiful a friend. Oh this is wonderful! Tears were streaming down her face as she looked up at the behemoth before her.

Why should you not have such a friend? You are a strong woman, and your companion will make you even stronger, and more beautiful than you are now. My Lady will explain all to you tomorrow. I must be off now. Good evening to you both.

Jake spread his wings and took off. Becky watched till he was just a speck in the evening sky and then turned to Kate.

“Oh Kate, he's wonderful! I can hardly wait for my own.” She was bubbling with joy.

“Don't sell yourself short Becky, I think you will make an excellent rider. It's the quiet ones that make the best and most fearsome riders. That's what Jakes says, you'll do just fine.”

As they returned to the Hall Kate admonished Becky to say nothing to the others. This was best discussed between riders only. Seeing the wisdom in this, she agreed.

After leaving Becky at the Hall, Kate decided to check on the rest of the camp. She started to head in the direction of the horse pens when Michael called to her. He had a problem and wanted to discuss something with her.

“Lady Jennie spotted a man coming this way. He’s climbing the mountain as we speak. She says he’s weak from lack of food, but he is a rider, so we must wait for him. Jake is taking a look now.”

“I’ll ask him if knows anything about him.” She stopped and scanned the skies for Jake as she spoke to him, *Jake, do you see him?*

Yes My Lady, I do; he is indeed weak, no food or water for several days. And yes, he is a rider. He is to be Lady Becky’s mate, it is very clear. He will not reach the top in his present condition.

Can you do anything for him? We must not loose him. Let Michael listen in on our conversation. What do you propose we do? She quickly explained to Michael what was going on.

Michael suggested right away, *Jake, Lady Jennie and I could fly close to him and pick him up. That is if he doesn’t panic at the sight of us. You could warn him we are coming.*

It will be unnecessary; he has the ‘sight’! He knows we are coming to aid him. He sees things, visions. He also can hear ‘THEM’. He is untrained and almost went mad because of it, only his sheer force of will has kept him sane. Jake was quiet for a few minutes.

Michael, I have explained all to Lady Jennie and she is coming for you. I have also informed Daniel and he is on his way to you My Lady.

On the far side of the mountains, about three hundred feet up the side of the last ridge before the misty valley began a lone figure was slowly making his way up. He was tired, dirty, hungry and very thirsty. But he wouldn’t stop; he was going to make it if it killed him. They couldn’t leave without him; he had to get there!

If these dreams are visions of the future, then someone is going to come and help me soon. He thought to himself. I know it - the dreams said they would fly to my rescue on a dragon. I’ve got to believe it’s going to happen. The dreams have led me for the past year, and this is where they said to go. He grabbed long root sticking out of the side of the mountain.

Excuse me, Collin, may I interrupt you. Please excuse this intrusion, but we see that you are in trouble and we would like to help. I have someone on the way to help you.

He almost lost his grip on the branch root he was holding. *Is this one of the dragons from my visions?*

Yes Collin it is; I am Jake.

You’re the First of the Ancients!

Yes Collin and you have the ‘sight’! We are coming to help you. Michael is riding Lady Jennie and they are on the way to pick you up. Can you hold on a bit longer?

Yes, I can hold on, but not for long. The branch is giving way. Let me see if I can reach another one. He stretched out his hand and found another root and held on for dear life. The dirt all around him was shaking, and a whirlwind suddenly started above his head. He heard shouting in his mind.

Collin, look up, Jake was calling to him, Michael is above you. Can you reach his hand? Try to reach his hand.

Collin looked up and almost let go out of surprise. His eyes took in a sight few people would ever see, and fewer would accept as real. Hovering above him was the biggest dragon he had ever seen. It was shiny brown, beautiful! And on it's back, leaning over and stretching out his hand was a dazzling young man.

Grab his hand Collin; he will take you to safety. We have been expecting you.

He reached out and pushed with his feet at the same time, producing a leap off the side of the mountain. Michael caught his arm and swung him over to his side.

Jake, please tell him to put his foot on one of Lady Jennie's ridges and push himself up to me. Then he can swing himself over and sit behind me.

He got the message and he was up and behind Michael in less than a minute. Lady Jennie curved to the right and gently glided over the mountaintop and headed for camp. He yelled in Michael's ear, "Please tell your companion I said 'thank-you' for her help."

My Michael, purred Lady Jennie after Michael relayed what Collin had said, he certainly does have manners. He will be an interesting addition to our family.

My Lady, we are on our way; the man is alive, and quite unafraid of us. Jake informed Kate.

Daniel and Kate along with Steve and Jerry were waiting in the field when they returned. The young man was indeed a mess. Michael slid off Lady Jennie and the young man tried to do the same. He collapsed on the ground in a heap. He lifted his head and tried to raise himself, and he then muttered "sorry folks," and fainted. He was slight of build, about 5'11", with thick black hair and hazel eyes.

Daniel and Steve picked him up and carried him to one of the temporary barracks and put him on a cot. They checked him over and found no broken bones, or serious injuries. They called for water and some towels and proceeded to try to get some fluids into him. Kate washed the grime from his face and that seemed to revive him a bit. Steve held him up and Daniel tried to give him some water. The young man grabbed it and drank thirstily.

"Mmm...good," he whispered. "God, thank you, Daniel, I thought I would never make it here in time." They all looked at each other... who was this young man?

Daniel stood and looked at Kate, both surprised. "I don't know him, never met him," he said as he shrugged his shoulders a look of bewilderment on his face. He turned and looked at the young man, "who are you, how do you know me?"

"In a minute, so dry, so hot, 'scuse me please," and he downed the water and asked for more. Jerry came in with a bucket of water and set it down. The young man slid out of the cot and went to the water and dumped the bucket on his head. "Aah...aah," he sighed in relief. He sat there drenched with a silly grin on his face.

"Sorry folks, but I was really hot. It's the dragons, do it to me every time! My name is Collin and I've been seeing you guys in dreams for almost a year now." He looked at each of them with those hazel eyes of his.

“Know all of you. Glad to see that you and your men made it here, Daniel. It was real important that you be here for the battle.” He was looking around at all of them, smiling. “I know this must seem strange, but imagine how it is for me. I knew you would be leaving in the morning for the eggs, and I had to be here for that run. My companion is waiting for me there. We’ve been talking for the last week. She’s really a spry little girl, can hardly wait to meet her.”

“You’re in contact with your egg? How is this possible?” Kate was dumbfounded. They all looked at each other in surprise; no one knew who their egg was until they were close to it.

“I can’t explain it, it was something that happened to me almost a year ago; after a really terrible battle. We were all pretty well cut up and bleeding, the dragons were winning. One of them was hit and it started dropping gobs of blood as it flew overhead. I just happened to be looking up as it passed over me and I was drenched in dragons’ blood. It also sent me flying with a tap from its tail. When I came to everyone was dead, and I soon found myself like this. I had to learn to live with it; or go mad. I can hear them all, but I have to shut that part off. I’m hoping Jake can help me with that. Say, can I get something to eat? Please?”

Kate answered him immediately, “Yes Collin, of course. Can you walk; it’s not far.” Daniel came forward and helped him up.

“You are even more beautiful than in my dreams Kate.” He was staring at her unabashedly, and she blushed, “you’re a lucky man Daniel.”

Just then Becky came in and asked if she could help. The young man turned to her and was riveted to the spot. He stared at her for a long time, and then smiled. “She’s lovely, oh my.” He tripped and Daniel caught him before he fell flat on his face. Becky left to tell Sam to prepare some food and the young man followed her with his eyes. “God I hope my dreams about her are right, she’s wonderful!”

Daniel had seen that look before - the boy was thunderstruck. “Come on lover-boy, let’s get you to the Hall and put some food in you.”

Steve and Jerry were talking among themselves on their way to the Hall, “it’s unnerving, spooky!” He laughed, “Oh after we get to know him we’ll just accept it as normal; normal for him that is!”

“Yea I suppose,” Jerry answered and then added, “It’s just weird that’s all!”

As they entered the Hall they spotted Daniel and Kate with the young man. He was sitting at a table with a pile of food spread out before him. He was stuffing his face with everything he could reach. Gradually he slowed and took a long breath.

“May I have some of your sweet tea, Kate?” She nodded smiling and went to get some for him. He turned to Daniel and whispered, “I’m sorry to arrive at this point; I don’t want to spoil your plans for tonight.”

Daniel’s eyes got wide, “You know about that also? Jesus, have we no secrets?” Daniel looked about gathering his thoughts and then told him, “Listen, Collin, you better keep this ability of yours under wraps for a bit. People are funny about having someone around who knows their every intimate move. It could spook them, understand?”

“No problem, Daniel. Umm... this is so good, and the honey and biscuits are fantastic!” Kate returned with his tea, “Thank you so much,” he drank half and continued eating.

“When you’re finished, we’re going to have a long talk mister,” Daniel was demanding. “Up above, with Jake present, so we can all join in the conversation.”

Collin stopped in mid-bite and stared at Daniel a long time. His eyes got all glassy, and he had a far away look on his face. Suddenly he began to speak.

“You still need one more female rider. There’s an Asian lady of about 40 or so I think, has black glossy hair, and dark brown eyes, lithe figure. I can’t picture her name for some reason, but she’s the one. She keeps to herself quite a bit. Gang raped by a band of marauders many years ago. Left her with a nasty scar, inside as well as out. She’ll become an amazing rider; and Jerry’s mate.”

He suddenly shook his head violently and looked about contritely, “I’m sorry, but that’s how it happens. I just spew this shit out and I can’t stop it. Maybe Jake can help me; I pray to God he can.”

Jerry was standing there with his mouth open, dumbfounded. “Shit man, no one, I mean no one knows how I feel about Beth! I’ve never told a soul; she doesn’t even know!”

Daniel was standing behind him and he put his hand on his shoulder, “easy Jerry, he didn’t mean any harm. You heard him; this is a burden for him too.” He went to Collin and asked, “Are you just about finished?”

“Daniel wait,” Kate was holding up her hand, “we’ll just have to repeat everything all over tomorrow for the other riders. Why don’t we do this tomorrow morning when we all meet. We can introduce him to them, and have a full conference discussion with Jake present. That way all the riders will be informed at the same time. I don’t want to keep anything from the other riders.” She was looking directly at Collin.

“I knew you were going to say that, and I agree.” Collin was looking at her.

“OK!” shouted Steve, “that’s one thing we are going to stop right now.” He bent down right in front of Collin, nose to nose; “no more ‘I knew you were going to say that’...got it?”

“Sure Steve, no problem.” He was smiling up at him; it was really hard to be stern with him.

Steve broke out into a smile, “and stop that too!” He threw his hands up, “arrgh!”

Daniel started to laugh, and it became an infectious laugh, and they all joined in.

“How about we settle you down for a good nights rest. I bet it’s been a while since you slept in a bed?” Daniel headed him back towards the temporary cave. “Since you know where everything is in the camp, you can clean yourself up in the morning and we’ll meet you for breakfast with the other riders. Then we’ll all go topside. OK?”

“Sounds great to me.” He stretched and let out a big yawn, sleepily he continued, “really, really great.”

Kate stood up, “I’ll leave him to you men. I’m going to track down Beth and see if she’s interested.” She looked right at Collin and held up her hand, “not a word, it’s her choice, and hers alone!” She patted him on the head, gave a quick kiss to Daniel, waved to the others and left the Hall.

Jake, what do you make of all this? She asked her friend and confidant.

He has the sight, but he must be taught to control it. I believe I can teach him how to turn it off. He is young and can be taught how to use it properly. The fact that his dragon is in contact with him already is truly amazing.

Do you know where I might find Beth?

Lady Beth is where she always is, on the South Ridge. She carries a crossbow with her at all times My Lady. So announce yourself loudly.

Thanks Jake.

Kate passed thru the camp and headed for the South Ridge. As she passed by the waterfall she heard some noises and she stopped. She could hear two lovers going at in the cavern behind the waterfall. Their passion was loud, and not drowned out by the rushing water. Ah, young love! I'll have to remember to try that with Daniel. She headed up the pathway that lead to the South Ridge.

Beth sat on a large boulder over looking the south ridge. She could see way off into the distance. There was a storm crossing the desert, huge streaks of lightening raced across the night sky providing her with her own private show. She was lost in her thoughts when she heard a noise behind her. Someone was coming up the path. She hoped it was Jerry; he had come up here several times. He was always very nice to her, didn't push her or try anything. She had begun to look forward to his visits. This time the sound was different; lighter, it was a woman... coming up here? Then she heard a voice call out.

"Beth, are you up here? It's Kate." Kate came around the bend and saw her climbing down off the boulder. "There you are, please don't get down for my benefit."

"This is a surprise. I didn't think you even knew I existed."

Shit! That sounded about as antagonistic as could be! God! I'm starting off on the wrong foot already.
 "I didn't mean that like it sounded. I'm sort of rusty at conversations," she said apologetically.

"Well, I can give you plenty of practice in the next couple of months." Beth looked at her questioningly. "Beth, do you ever dream of riding a dragon, a very special dragon?" Kate could see by the look on her face that she had hit the mark. "They're visions Beth, not dreams. I'd like you to consider becoming a dragon rider. What do you think?" Kate smiled her best smile and waited for her reply. *She's looking at me like I'm the mad hatter or something.*

"Me?" She was obviously taken aback. "Me!" She started walking around in a tight circle. Kate sat down and waited. "Why not me? I'm a dead shot with the crossbow; know Tai Kwan Do; I would make a good fighter. I could... I would... I, I..." she stopped and stood there trembling, large sobs coming from deep inside her.

Kate had not expected this response. This woman always seemed so together. Apparently it was all a front to cover the fear that ruled her. "Beth, calm yourself," Kate went to her and put her arm around her the way a sister would. "Easy there Beth. Haven't you ever dreamed about riding a dragon across the desert at night? Feeling the wind blowing across your skin and thru your hair, knowing the dragon you are riding as one knows an old friend."

"I thought they were just dreams. Not real." She was looking at Kate now, and there was hope in her eyes. "Do they really talk to you, only you? And they're all yours, completely?"

"Yes Beth, the best friend, and companion you could possibly want. They never judge you, and they accept you exactly as you are. I could not imagine my life without Jake. He is my friend, my companion. Don't let what happened to you destroy your life." She continued in a softer voice, "you know what happened to me four years ago, and I was an old woman at the time. But I refused to let it take over my life. Jake showed me that in the great scheme of things it was simply a ripple in time. There were a lot more important things than that unpleasant memory. So I let it go; I've been free ever since. You can be too."

Beth stared at Kate for a long time; she went to her and embraced her. "Yes, yes, yes! I am most interested. I want the same thing, and I will fight to get it if I have to, yes Kate."

“Good! That’s what I want to hear. There are six of us and we are all meeting at the Hall for breakfast. Then we are going up to the top. Michael and I will instruct you all and then we will go get the dragon eggs. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow morning, Beth. You will make a formidable dragon rider; and that is Jake’s opinion.”

Kate left her in a lot better mood than she found her. She would be all right. *We are starting to take real shape. Soon we will begin what Jake says we have all been prepared to do. This has been quite an evening. I’m going to head home.*

Back on the ridge, Beth sat and thought for a long time. She was very excited. *If what she says is true, I will finally be free. And I’ll bet that Jerry is one of the riders. The future is starting to look real good. I can believe the dreams now, all of them. My very own dragon! I can’t wait. Oh thank-you Kate for bringing me such good news!* She picked up her crossbow and headed down the path.

She met Jerry coming up. They both stopped and looked at each other. She was smiling, too happy to hide her excitement. Then Jerry broke out in a big grin. They didn’t have to say anything; he took her hand and walked down the rest of the way with her. At her cave he gently bent close to her and kissed her on the cheek. She blushed, but she kissed him back very briefly on the lips, and went inside.

“Yes!” he whispered to himself as he walked away. *Everything is going to work out; just the way it’s supposed to. Oh shit, the ceremony! I’ve got to get a move on!* He hurried to get to the mountaintop before the ceremony began.

Kate had made it back to her cave, when Michael came in and asked her to do him a favor. “What is it Michael?”

“I want you to pick your best clothes and put them on and come with me. No questions!” He was trying his best to get her up top without revealing why.

“What? All right, what’s going on? Is this some kind of a joke?” Kate asked him.

“Please don’t ask any questions. Just do this for me. You’ll be glad you did later, believe me. Kate I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important.” He gave her his best ‘oh please’ look

She finally agreed, and went to her dressing room area and washed up and got dressed. She looked beautiful when she came back out. She had on a leather riding outfit, “Now what is going on?”

“Just take my arm and come with me please. No questions.” He started up the pathway to the mountaintop. As they emerged Kate was taken by surprise at the sight before her.

Jake and Lady Jennie stood on each side of Daniel. There was a line of people on each side. Michael took her arm and led her down the pathway between them. Sam and Lucy, smiling like Cheshire cats. Jerry, and Steve and Ashley, Big John, and even Jeff were there. Michael led her to Daniel.

Kate smiled at him and asked, “You’ve got that wicked smile on your face, what’s up?”

“I asked all of you here to be a witness to something.” Daniel began and turned to Kate and took her hand, “I have asked this woman to marry me, and she said that she would,” he announced to everyone.

“But I’m afraid that there are no preachers to do the job. So I decided the best way to do this is for the couple to marry themselves, in front of their dragons and friends. So I say to you Kate; I love you. I will love you for the rest of my life. I promise that I will honor you, respect you, protect you, and love the hell out of you every chance I get.”

Everyone laughed loudly at that one. Lucy dabbed at her eyes.

“You have stirred my heart; you have given me a glimpse of just how wondrous my life will be. My heart is yours.” He took a small box out of his pocket and opened it. Inside were two simple gold wedding bands with 4 diamonds down the center of each. “These rings represent our union. The four diamonds represent you and me, and Jake and Queenie; together for life!” He took one of the rings and placed it on Kate’s finger. Her eyes were filled with tears as she looked up at him.

She took the other ring and held Daniel’s hand. She looked into his eyes and suddenly it was just the two of them. “I love you, you impossible man you! Yes, I love you to utter distraction. You are a constant surprise to me. You have brought me back to life; you’ve showed me that love can be a beautiful, gentle thing. You’ve showed me what pleasure there is in loving well. I shall love you, and respect you, and honor you all the days of my life.” She placed the ring on his finger and stood there staring at him.

Daniel smiled and then in a deep voice said, “Come here, wife!” He pulled her to him, took her in his arms and kissed her long and passionately. Jake and Lady Jennie reared their heads up and back and roared their approval as flames shot into the air.

Everyone was clapping and shouting. They all came up and wished them well, shook hands with Daniel, and kissed Kate on the cheek.

Kate and Daniel went to Jake and he lowered his head. She hugged him and kissed him on the nose. Daniel gave him a big bear hug. *Thank you Jake, we are both very happy.*

I am happy for you both also. Lady Jennie was very touched by your speech Daniel.

Daniel went to Lady Jennie and bowed first, “Michael, please tell her that I am so pleased that she approves.” She lowered her head to Daniel and he kissed her on the nose also. She quickly raised her head and roared her approval. “If I didn’t know any better I’d swear she was blushing,” he shouted laughing. Both dragons then took to the air. After a bit more of congratulations, everyone descended.

They were left alone, standing there gazing into each other’s eyes. Kate was staring at the ring that Daniel had given her. “You completely surprised me Daniel, I am so happy. It’s these little things that you do for me that make me love you all the more.”

“We are going to be very busy in the next couple of months my love,” Daniel said as he picked Kate up in his arms. “So lets enjoy tonight, wife,” he carried her down to their new home.

He entered their cave and placed her on their bed. “I love you Kate. That’s all there is to it. I want to make you happy.” She started to undress and he stopped her. “Let me do this” he told her. She blushed as he proceeded to remove her clothing, something he enjoyed doing. He spent the next hour pleasuring her and making her beg for him to stop. They finally fell asleep holding each other, happy and contented.

Below, in Ashley's cave Steve was getting ready to say good night and take his leave. To his surprise, Ashley took his hand and asked him to stay. She smiled and told him that she wasn't going to make him wait any longer. She wanted to be with him. Then she led him to her bedroom; there were candles lit and placed all around her cave. She had obviously been planning this for some time. Remembering all the things that Daniel and Jake had told him, Steve took his time and spent the next several hours gently loving her. He found to his surprise she was a remarkable woman. It was like Daniel had said; he found more pleasure than he had ever known. They would never be apart again.

During the night Jake circled the mountain and watched as the camp went silent and all were asleep. He continued to send dreams to those who needed encouragement, and to those who need hope.

As the sun was rising, Jake sent his thoughts above as he did each morning.

Father, it is all coming together as You said it would. Kate and Daniel will be the cement that holds these people together. And my Queen will soon be among us; with her arrival will come the future for us all.

The next morning found all the candidates in the Great Hall. They chose to sit together at one of the larger tables. They were all refreshed and full of anticipation at the coming event. Daniel introduced each person to the others. Collin, true to his word, kept quiet. They ate quickly, murmuring softly among themselves. They finished quickly and went above as a group to meet with Jake. The other members of the community felt their energy; they knew something was about to happen. Once they arrived at the hatching ground, Kate began by giving them a brief history of dragons.

“Eons ago man and dragon worked together as a team. Somewhere along the way man was elected to go his own way, without the dragons.” She solemnly looked at everyone; “I think we can agree that we botched it up pretty good.” Heads shook in agreement. Then she began to tell them what it was going to be like when they went for their eggs.

“When you enter the grounds, it will be very dark. Take time to adjust your eyes. Look around for any puddles of water. It won’t be water; it’ll be dragon urine. Roll around in it if you can; get the smell all over you. It could save your life if any of the other dragons show up. Carefully look around for a place to hide yourself from sight. Be very careful, do not, I repeat, do not touch any eggs. Get settled somewhere and then be very still. Listen with your mind for any sounds. When you hear a small child calling out to you, raise your hand to signal the others, and then begin to talk to it using your mind. The little dragonet will be very excited when it makes contact with you. Calm it, and ask it where it is; try to locate it. When you are sure you have it, gently pick it up. There will be a small electric shock,” she raised her hands and patted the air, “it’s ok. That bonds you to the egg, and the dragon to you.” Kate made eye contact with each of the candidates, “what you feel now will be first contact with your dragon. He or she will fill your mind with such feelings of love and contentment that it will sweep you away for a moment. Try to keep control, tell it that you must get away quickly and the feeling will subside. Place the egg in your shirt next to your skin. The little dragonet will lead you out and Jake will tell you where to go once you are outside. Each of you will do this, one at a time until it is finished.” Kate stood erect and looked at all of the candidates and smiled.

“Now, for formality’s sake, do all of you give permission for Jake to speak to you whenever it is necessary?” Heads nodded all around, “you must tell Jake yes, in your minds.”

They have all said yes My Lady. Jake answered immediately.

Daniel came forward holding pieces of material, which he gave to Kate. She held them up and demonstrated their use.

“This is a carrier I made when I hauled Jake around with me. It works real well while the eggs are small. You place it over your head like this, and you can take the egg with you when you go about your daily chores.” She handed one to each of the candidates and they placed it about themselves. “Take your dragon egg to bed with you at night. Sleep curled up around it, don’t worry, you won’t hurt it. Use your mind and talk to your dragon as much as possible. Tell him or her all about yourself, about those you lost, about what you do during the day, you can tell him anything. Also tell him how wonderful he is, how beautiful he’s going to be. Praise and love are the keys. The more love, the bigger the dragon. Jake is three times the size of the biggest of the Insane Ones. Your dragons won’t be as big as Jake. But I wouldn’t say that Lady Jennie is small, would you?”

There was some laughter at that question.

“As your dragon gets bigger, it will take on a more mature voice. You will notice that for yourselves. Your dragon will share with you vast stores of knowledge. Don’t worry about remembering all of it. When you need it, it will pop into your head. When your dragon egg is too big to carry around any more, place it on the hatching ground. If you want to sleep there with it, that’s ok; I did for a while. The eggs will harden, and will grow quite large. Continue to visit your eggs every day and as often as you want. When your dragon is ready to hatch, he or she will call to tell you to come quickly. You must be the first person your dragon sees when it emerges from the egg.” Kate’s heart was filled with excitement for these future dragon riders. She was remembering her first meeting with Jake, and she smiled at the joy these people were about to experience.

“This is going to be a momentous event in your lives.” She was looking at all of their eager faces. **“I can’t fully explain the feeling that will engulf you when you see each other for the first time. It is a very emotional and spiritual moment. Just prepare yourselves for a very moving experience. It will change you in ways I can’t even begin to explain.”**

“As to the changes that will take place physically to your bodies; you will become more of what you already are. Your body will slowly become taut, muscular. To the women, you will notice that your hair is lush, growing at a rapid rate. Your breasts and buttocks will raise and become as in youth. The men will also have rapid hair growth; sorry but long hair is in guys. Your bodies will be perfect in muscle tone and shape. You will have enormous energy. You will find that you will become night owls, needing hardly any sleep. You will understand things quicker - your thought processes will be much faster. You will communicate with each other at a faster level than the others, almost anticipating each other. This will become the norm for us.”

“Now my future riders; this next is most important, so I stress this point. Do not ever – ever - make those below feel that you are superior to them. We are here to serve, and save mankind, not rule them. We have all been chosen for this because of our unique ability to see to the truth of things. We can ill afford to let any negativity enter our minds or our future world. All that would do is breed discord, and we would soon be back where we started. We are to become a new breed of humans, Riders of Dragons! Our job is to save this world of ours; and to begin anew. It will begin with just us six. But when Daniel’s queen comes of age, she will mate with Jake; and we will have all the eggs we need.”

She continued using her mind:

After your dragon hatches and grows a bit more, you will take your first ride. During that time the ‘enhancement’ will take place. I will let Jake explain it to you.

Jake rose up to his full height and the candidates all let out uncontained, “ahs, and ohs!”

Fellow riders, I salute you! You are about to enter a new world. You will be its future. During your first flight you will become one with your dragon. There will be a solidifying of you both. You will feel what your dragon feels. Your bodies, rider and dragon, will become perfection.

As long as you are on your dragon, you will be as one. But, if you should find yourself on the ground, and your dragon is in the air fighting, you will be in the throes of the battle. You will feel each blow and each victory.

When your dragon goes into heat, you and your mate will feel that same urge. That is why it is so important that you all have mates. There will be no fighting it, nor stopping it. You will be overcome by pure animal lust. The urges will quickly overtake you, so find your mate quickly and go into seclusion. What takes place there is for you and your dragons alone to share. I will tell you this; you will become more as a direct result of this mating. There are no human words to describe this physical and spiritual melding.

I have been busy making quarters for all of you here, in the mountain. You may pick your caves, and we will put the necessary things you require in them. My Lady will take you to the town to get anything you need to make your home yours. All these preparations must be finished before the hatching takes place. Are there any questions?

I have one. It was Beth I am not too sure about this mating part.

Jake turned his full attention to Beth. Lady Beth, I understand your fear. But believe me when I say that you need not fear Jerry. I can see what is in his heart. He cares for you more than you know. Do not be embarrassed my Lady, there are no secrets between all of us. We all must be as one family. Lady Beth you must allow your heart to show you what true love can do.

Tears began to form in Beth's eyes; she made fists with her hands clenching them tightly.

Lady Ashley and Steve discovered that last night. They were surprised and pleased that they had taken the chance. Now they know what love is really like. Is that not so Steve?

Steve looked at Ashley, and she at him, blushing, there was no doubt about the love that passed between them. Yes Jake, it's true. I love her more than I thought possible.

Beth, Jerry now joined the conversation, I wouldn't admit to anyone how I felt about you. I've wanted to tell you, but I was afraid that you would run away. So instead I became your friend. I have dreamt of you for so long, and when I saw you, I had hope that maybe someday you would see me as more than a friend. I respect you Beth, and I won't do anything to upset you. But maybe you can give me a chance to prove to you just how much I care.

Oh Jerry, Beth was crying softly, I want to try. Will you have patience with me? I want to have what everyone else has found too.

Beth, Jerry went to her, we can do this together, we will make it happen. Jerry held her tenderly to him.

Jake now turned his attention to Collin.

Now to Collin: For everybody's benefit, he arrived yesterday evening. He has the 'sight'. He already knows all of you for he has had visions of you all for the past year. He keeps those things to himself. I shall attempt to teach him to control what he sees, and not to blurt out what he knows. It could be upsetting to those below. He will be able to aid us when we go into battle- for you see - he hears THEM!

Becky suddenly burst out; do you mean to say that Collin is my mate? Well it's about time, I've dreamt of him, but I could never see his face. But I know that walk anywhere! There was laughter all around. Who would have guessed that Becky was a take-charge girl!

Kate and Daniel stood together holding hands. Daniel began, "this is a real good beginning. We have no secrets from each other. There is no shame, and no embarrassment between us; we are like one big family. When we finally become riders, we will be even closer. We are a family!" He held his arms wide and they all stood up and did the same. "We are family, yes, family!"

Steve stepped forward and looked directly at Jake. Jake, not to throw a wrench into all this... but... well, sometimes I feel like all of this is a dream. Like I'm going to wake up and find myself back in my bed in the barracks. Or worse, in a padded cell somewhere!

Jake chuckled loudly. *Calm your fears Steve. All of you listen to me; to have second thoughts about all of this is natural. But understand me clearly, this is real. The choice is yours to make; but remember this, you were all chosen for the task that lies ahead.*

They all looked at each other and then at Jake. They knew he was telling the truth; this was bigger than all of them.

At a suggestion from Jake, Daniel turned to Collin and asked, *All right Collin, what can you tell us about where we are going?*

Collin looked around at each person grinning, then he began, “There are no dragons in the area right now, and I hear none approaching. The eggs we seek are all towards the left rear of the chamber. But there is something else, wait a minute,” Collin squinted up his eyes as if trying to see something, “there’s an extra egg there. It, it belongs with us, but I do not know who it belongs to.”

“I do,” said a small voice from the back of the chamber.

Everyone turned around at the sound of Sally’s voice. “It’s my egg. I’ve been hearing it for several days now. I didn’t know what to do so I went to Jake for advice.”

Kate turned and faced Jake asking, *Jake, you knew about this?*

Yes, Sally has been dreaming all of this for months now. She came to me and asked what she should do. I have been instructing her on the care of her egg. I also told her to speak with Michael, since they are friends. I told her to come here and stay in the back until she was needed. She is to be Michael’s mate, My Lady. The enhancement will age her to a young woman.

Michael stepped forward; *it’s ok Kate. I’ve known for some time. Sally and I have spoken about her dreams and compared them to mine. I can help her with the transition. I have been thru it myself; remember?*

Kate was trying to put all this new information in perspective. She knew she would have to explain all this to Sam and Lucy.

“I certainly hope there are no more surprises!” Steve echoed for all of them.

There is one more order of business; Jake said commanding their attention, Jeffrey. They all turned and looked at Jeff as Jake continued. He is to be our advisor and our chronicler; he is part of our family. He will help plan our battles, but he is not to ride a dragon. In order to do all these things with us, he must go thru the same enhancement as all of us. I can do this for him, but only if he truly agrees; do you Master Jeffrey?

Well now, said Jeffery pondering this question, I’m not too sure about it. Will it hurt, Jake?

No, it will not. Jake chuckled at his question. After all the eggs are hatched and all have taken their first rides; it can be done. It only requires that all of you ask your dragons to fly with me for one special flight. Jeffrey will ride on me and we will take to the skies. During the flight Jeffrey will become familiar with all the dragons and they with him. The knowledge of all will be given to him. When we land, the change will be apparent. You will have a new body as a result of the enhancement ride. You will be in excellent health. Jake lowered his head right in front of Jeffrey. Big black eyes stared at and thru him. Do you agree?

Jeff looked around, he saw the faces of his new family and his heart was full, he turned and faced Jake. Yes Jake, I agree! If my knowledge of history will help in the future of our world, then my continued existence will be of some use.

It is settled. My Lady, you will have to tell Sam and Lucy before we can go. They must know of Sally's decision.

Yes Jake, I will go now. Kate turned to leave.

Not without me. Daniel came to her side. "We will do this together woman." He took her hand and they both left the cave and headed down the mountain.

Down at the Hall, most people had left and were heading to their various chores for the day. Daniel and Kate spotted Sam and caught his eye. He came over to them and they asked that he call Lucy over also.

"We've got something to tell the both of you," Kate began, "Sally has been having dreams of riding a dragon. She went to Jake and asked for his help; he and Michael have been guiding her. She came to us this morning just as we were preparing to leave for the eggs. She was insistent that we take her with us. She wants to be a rider Sam, and we've accepted her."

"But she's so young," blurted out Lucy. "She's just a baby!" She buried her face in Sam's arms sobbing. He patted her and held her.

"Now, now, we've discussed this happening, we both knew it would. Lucy dear," he stroked her head, "remember that they marked her at an early age. We all know that the dreams tell us of what is to be. If Sally saw herself riding a dragon, is it right for us to object? Michael was only a young boy, and look at him now. He is a fine young man, yes, a fine young man."

After much talk and finally, acceptance, they gave her their blessing.

"I'm still going to cry about it. She's like my own daughter," sobbed Lucy. "But if this will make her happy, I won't stand in her way."

They said their good byes and Daniel and Kate headed back up the mountain.

“We need to leave now so we will be back by this afternoon,” Kate announced to the assembled group. “Michael and Lady Jennie will take the women. Jake and I will take the rest.” Kate looked at these bright young people and she was filled with hope for the world. “Are we ready?”

“Yes,” was the resounding reply!

They all ascended to the top of the mesa where Jake and Lady Jennie were waiting. They were instructed on how to climb aboard the dragons. First the women were loaded onto Lady Jennie. Michael made sure Sally was directly behind him. “Hold onto my waist and you’ll do just fine,” he reassured her. He saw to it that the rest had a good hold. Then they slowly rose into the morning sky and circled above Jake.

The men then climbed aboard Jake, each one finding a seat and a ridge to hold onto. Kate asked Jake if they were too heavy for him. Jake let out a chuckle, saying that they were barely any trouble at all. He then took off over the mountain and joined Lady Jennie and they headed out west, towards the newfound hatching ground. The flight took barely 40 minutes. Of course they were going at dragon speed, a pretty fast pace.

My Lady, there are no dragons in the vicinity, announced Jake, we can land safely and begin our task.

Lady Jennie landed first and the women got off. Jake landed just as she and Michael took off and the men jumped down and joined the women. Kate wished them luck, gave a wave to Daniel, then she and Jake took off. They would remain circling above while the small band made their way into the cavern.

There was a small opening towards the back of the mountain just as Collin said there would be. They all went inside, Daniel leading them. With Jake as the go between, they used their minds to communicate to each other in a limited fashion. It was a rather large cave, with a small archway that led to a larger chamber. They were trying to let their eyes adjust.

Remember what we were told; let your eyes adjust to the dark. Does anyone see a puddle of dragon piss? Daniel asked no one in particular.

Over here, Jerry had adjusted to the dark first; it’s over there, towards the sidewall, by that boulder.

Ok guys, let’s get this over with and go to the main cave. Daniel urged everyone.

One by one they rolled in the urine, the smell of ammonia so strong that Sally retched. But she continued anyway, determined to do this. They entered the main cave one at a time and immediately went to the back as instructed. They all went down to their knees and waited. Quietly they listened for any sound. Dripping water, plop plopping down, was the only sound they heard.

Hey there girl, I’m here! Come on, talk to me love. Where are you, how can I find you? Collin was calling his dragonet.

Collin? Is that you my friend? A tiny little girl-voice asked. *You are here!*

Collin's hand went up; he moved forward and went like a shot to a small egg lying by itself. He hovered over it for a few minutes, and they all heard his side of the conversation; but not the replies. He picked it up and there was a slight electric shock and his body shook uncontrollably.

It's her!

He turned to them and there was a look of such joy on his face, the transformation was striking. They all knew that they would soon be feeling that same joy. A few minutes later Collin tucked her under his shirt and slowly made his way out of the chamber.

Beth's hand went up next. She did the same, moving forward slowly. She had some difficulty finding her egg; it was under a piece of shell. Once she lifted it, there was a moment of hesitation, then a spreading smile on her face and she too was engulfed by that joy of knowing she had found her dragon.

On and on it went, for 2 hours, one at a time, they all found their eggs, except for Daniel. He waited, but there was no sound. He called out with his mind, *Queenie, where are you? Are you hurt? Lead me to you.* Nothing; he was getting worried. Maybe he wasn't supposed to find an egg this time. Then he heard her, from far away. His heart soared that this was all true. He could barely make out what she was saying, just a tiny, weak voice. She sounded like a very tired child.

Help! Please ... so dark... I cannot see. He heard great sobbing that just wretched his heart. *Please do not leave me here! Do not go, please!*

Daniel had to calm her before she panicked. *Baby, calm down, I am not leaving here without you. Got that? I will fight a dozen dragons before I let you go. Now calm down baby. I am going to throw a rock around the chamber. Now I want you to listen very carefully, and tell me what you hear and in what direction.* He threw a pebble towards the far side of the chamber, nothing. He threw another towards his right, nothing. He threw one to his left.

Oh! That hit on top of me. Are you there? Daniel moved to the spot where the pebble had landed. There was a large pile of eggshells. He began to remove them one at a time. *I can see some light! Oh do hurry! They may come back!*

He continued to remove the shells. At the bottom was a final shell fragment and as he removed it he saw a perfectly rounded silver egg. The light entering the chamber highlighted the egg giving it a luminescence of its own. He waved his hand over the egg. *Is that you? A shadow just passed over me.*

Yes! I found you my sweet!

Daniel picked up the egg, and immediately there was a large electric charge that shot out of the egg and went directly into him. He shuddered violently for a moment and was knocked to his knees; and then his eyes grew wide as he felt something warm encircle him, his mind was filled with a strange new feeling of love. He felt it so strongly and was filled with wonder as they bonded as dragon and rider.

Yes, I can feel you my fearless friend, oh my, what a strong will! Ah Daniel, at last we have found each other! You have saved me, my friend, my companion for life; together we shall be unstoppable!

Daniel could not have imagined the emotions that engulfed him. He was so filled with a feeling of love and acceptance that his eyes filled up with tears. He held her up and beheld this little speck inside the egg. He stood there talking to her totally engrossed. Finally, he put her under his shirt and secured her to him. Tears were streaming down his face as he emerged from the cave. He looked up at Kate and nodded his head in a 'yes' to her unspoken question.

Jake let loose with a throaty roar that scared the hell out of everyone.

Kate calmed them all down and then Jake and Lady Jennie landed. Everyone mounted, and they all headed home. Several times during the flight back Jake turned his head and locked eyes with Daniel. What passed between them was never spoken of, but they were bound together as brothers from that day forward.

Once they landed they all took their dragon eggs to the hatching ground. Jeffrey was waiting for them; Jake had kept him informed of their progress. There they laid their eggs, turned and asked Jeff to guard their treasures. Then they all descended to the waterfall to wash off the dragon urine. After cleaning themselves up they returned to claim their lifelong friends. Each one sat down on the warm hatchings grounds with their egg and continued their conversations. Kate knew they were talking to their charges and would be unable to communicate with anyone for several hours. The rapture would last that long at least.

Jake, we have begun this day what may prove to be the salvation of the world. I am so proud of each and every one of them. Kate spoke with great humility what was in her heart.

Especially Daniel, My Lady, he received the charge, just as you did when we first met; she is indeed a Queen! And Sally did very well; she has a brown with a silverback. Well suited for Lady Jennie. I am pleased My Lady, well pleased indeed!

Sleeping bags had been brought in earlier as they knew these people would not leave their charges or this spot till morning. Kate and Jeffrey left the chamber quietly, their parting not being noticed by the others.

It was five weeks before Daniel returned to Kate's bed. During that time they were very busy. Kate noticed that the pairings had already taken hold of the riders. Each pair had picked their cave and they began making it their home. There were several forays to the town for furniture and rugs, and household items. They were content, and each accepted their mate with great tenderness.

Lady Beth had finally gotten over her fear; and Jerry had listened to Jake's advice, and took his time and showed her what pleasure there was in loving well. Beth found peace and trust in Jerry's arms and they were very affectionate towards each other. It was sweet to watch them together as their newfound love blossomed. If this could be done for Beth, then there was hope for the rest of the women in camp.

The group of riders became a tightly knit group. They spoke among themselves quite a bit, and joked around with each other as brothers and sisters. Already the changes could be seen in these exceptional people. They had enormous energy for one; chores were done with great zeal, finished in half the time. Many of the riders could be seen walking the camp at night; they required less sleep. They seemed to seek each other out when in the Hall, a small little exclusive group, the fact of which was not lost on the rest of the camp

Sam had seen some resentment building and had spoken at length with Jake about it. He wanted to be the one to explain to the camp what was at stake. He called a meeting of the camp and excluded the riders. Then he began to explain that the care of the dragonets would take a great deal of their time, and they would naturally gravitate towards their fellow riders.

"You must understand that the future of our world is at stake. These men and women will be the first wave in a battle for our very existence. They willingly accepted the task that was asked of them," he explained to them, "understand this, they could all die in the process."

He paused, looked at each and everyone, and then continued; “For you see it is they who will have to fight the black devils who took all our families. It is they who will face the brunt of the anger from the beasts that destroyed our world.” He looked about the room. “How easy do you think that will be?” Looking at the future riders now with new eyes, the camp gave them the respect that they deserved, and there was no more resentment.

The most noticeable change among the riders was in Sally’s appearance. She had grown about an inch, and she was loosing her chubby little girl face. It was being replaced by a much more mature face, one that did not highlight her scar. Her hair had grown long and the golden tresses were accented with a long white streak that framed one side of her face. Her body was blossoming also, the beginnings of ample breasts was evident. And she had gone to Lady Beth for advice when she got her first period.

Michael did not miss any of these changes in Sally’s appearance either. He watched her with growing eyes of love. He had gone to Daniel for advice on how to approach her and also, after much hemming and hawing about, how to go about making love for the first time. It was then that Daniel realized to his surprise, that Michael was a virgin. He never had any experience or knowledge in the art of lovemaking. Schooling him was something that Daniel was unsure of how to go about. He consulted with Kate, who reminded Daniel of Miss Susan. Of course! If she were willing, she would be able to teach him correctly.

So Daniel approached Miss Susan about it; and after much haggling and a promise of an introduction to Jeffery, the 'Professor' as she called him; she said she would be willing to 'start Michael off on the right foot'. After Daniel and Kate spoke, the deal was sealed and the deed was done. Miss Susan was true to her word; she taught Michael well. She took her time; taught him how to make love slowly, gently, tenderly, so that he wouldn't frighten Sally the first time. And Michael, new to the physical joys, strutted around camp like 'king stud' for several days, until Daniel pulled him aside and told him to cool it.

Daniel kept his word and played his part in introducing Miss Susan to Jeffery. Much to the surprise of everyone, they hit it off quite well! It goes to show that you never know about people.

The eggs now began to grow at an accelerated rate. The riders all spent as much time as they could with them. In several weeks time Daniel's queen was too heavy to carry any longer. Her shell was starting to harden. She was growing quickly, and the other eggs were soon following her example. Everyone thought that they would have to wait six months before the eggs hatched. At the rate they were growing it would be a lot sooner, maybe less than two months. During the day they kept in touch with their dragons using telepathy, strengthening their link with their dragons.

Michael said it was time to introduce the 'twins' to the rest of the gang. They came bounding into the chamber and sniffed and barked their approval over each egg. The dragonets were delighted, and began to keen, even in their eggs; but they were upset when they realized that they couldn't communicate with the large dogs.

Sally, on the other hand, had let Oreo stay with her and her dragon egg from the very beginning. They had all slept together in Sally's bed at night. The kitten had licked the egg, as cats are prone to do, and cared for it and purred over it. During the day when Sally was gone with her chores, Oreo had curled around it and slept with it. It was during this time that a bond developed between Oreo and Sally's egg. They communicated on some level unknown to humans, but it worked.

Sally was able to find out, thru her dragon that Oreo was very grateful that she had been saved by Daniel that day and brought to Sally. Her life was full; and she enjoyed playing with her 'brothers', Ash and Tabs. And the 'mighty dragons' protected her from the 'burning ones'. Sally was excited to learn this bit of news and couldn't wait to tell the others. She was answered with a lot of loud 'yea right', and 'sure', until their own dragonets told them that it was true.

Beth, true to form, piped up, "Always said that cats were smarter than dogs!"

Winter was upon them before they realized it. Daniel woke one morning and the mountain was covered in a blanket of snow, the air was cool, crisp and clean. He awoke with an enormous amount of energy and an air of expectancy. He couldn't contain himself and began to wake Kate up with gentle messaging that turned her thoughts to lovemaking. She could feel the excitement in him, she knew what that meant; the time was very near.

"My love, I believe your Queen will be making her debut very soon."

Daniel agreed with her, "I feel it also my love, but it's this incessant waiting that I find so hard." With a devilish look he grinned at her and said, "but I bet I know one way to pass the time."

"Daniel, no, we have things to do," begged Kate. But there was no stopping him this morning, so they stayed in their cave till noon. Not that she really minded.

Down at the Hall the others were concerned for them; they hadn't seen them all morning. They asked Jake if they were all right, and he assured them that they were, and chuckled.

"Ah, Daniel is at it again, the man is a dynamo!" Steve blurted out, "I don't know where he gets all that energy from; but he sure puts it to good use!" They all laughed, and quickly stopped when Kate and Daniel walked into the Hall together, smiling.

"Hey you two," said Beth, "we were beginning to get concerned. But Jake said you were just fine. You're setting a bad example." She was grinning at Kate who was blushing bright red.

Daniel and Kate joined them for lunch. They chatted among themselves, and were trying to decide if they should make some kind of sled for the camp to use during the winter months when suddenly Daniel, who was in mid bite of a sandwich, froze. He dropped his sandwich and slowly rose; he had a silly-looking grin on his face.

My Lady, she hatches! They could all hear the throaty roar as Jake signaled the emergence of his Queen.

Daniel looked up towards the hatching ground. Kate knew immediately that this was it. He turned around and looked at Kate with wide eyes and gave her hand a quick tight squeeze; he made a flimsy excuse and left them. Kate told them she was sure that his queen was hatching.

Daniel rushed up the mountain so fast that he was out of breath when he entered the hatching ground. There were large pieces of shell strewn about. He was so overcome and excited that he had to stop himself and take a deep breath. To the rear of the chamber he heard movement.

He called out to her with his mind, *Queenie, are you okay? Are you hurt; don't be afraid my sweet, it is me, Daniel.*

In his mind he heard the soft sultry voice of his beautiful Queenie, *My Daniel, my sweet Daniel, come - let us meet properly.*

Daniel spun around and his eyes flew wide in amazement as he stared at his dragon for the first time. *Twenty-two feet at least*, he thought to himself. She was silver in color, with black ridges, and black about her eyes with a dab of purple at the corner of each eye. *My God, you're beautiful!* He found he was shaking all over. *Oh how I have wanted to see you, to meet you! Queenie, you are more than I ever imagined!*

Of course I am! She spread her wings, reared back and then lowered her head to right in front of him. *I am Queen Dragon, Mate to the First; companion to Daniel, rider of my heart, who saved me.* They stood like that for almost half an hour; electric charges passing between them, there was a bright light engulfing the both of them.

Suddenly, Daniel felt himself rising up until he was suspended in the air before her. Slowly her wings wrapped around him and he began to turn. A warm light surrounded them and filled the cave. Information flowed into his brain, the history of these noble creatures, visions of things to come; dragons yet to come, Kate with her arms outstretched. And then there was Jake in all his majesty. The sharing of knowledge so profound his head began to pound. The transformation began and continued for several hours.

After a time she spoke again; *My Daniel, you have a good mind for a human, I am very pleased. You have a strong moral foundation; this is very good. The name you call me my Daniel, I shall keep. Queenie! For indeed I am a Queen! You have passed thru the first part of enhancement well; I can see why Lady Kate loves you so. She has very good taste! Ah but now I am hungry, and my mate, Jake wishes to see me, and I him. I must leave to feed, I shall return to you in two days.*

She stood upright and headed for the opening. Then she turned around once more and looked at Daniel. She raised her head and roared 'Approval' loudly. She then bent over, spread her wings and glided out of the cave.

Down below they saw her emerge from the cave and heard a mighty roar from Jake. They watched as they flew around each other, entwined their heads and then flew off together.

It took awhile for Daniel to get his emotions under control; it had been an emotional experience that he had been unprepared for. Realization that this was all really happening had brought things into focus. He had gone to his knees and said a prayer of thanks for the opportunity to start again.

Kate was anxious to speak with Daniel, and after a bit he came back down the mountain. Changes had taken place during that meeting. As he came down the mountain, Daniel walked like a leader of his people. There was purpose and intent in his strides. His appearance was that of a younger man. He was still Daniel but much more; leaner, more muscular, fine-tuned. His eyes locked on Kate as he descended the mountain. She alone knew what he was feeling; she alone knew what had occurred up above.

Daniel went directly to Kate and took her in his arms hugging her for a long time.

"She is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen, Kate. She's all sliver with black around the ridges of her eyes with purple mixed in, her eyes are gray in a pool of gold. And she's a bit haughty, as a Queen would be." He was grinning at the memory of her. "Oh Kate, you have no idea what it was like, on second thought; yes, you do know! You are right; there are no words to describe the experience. We are all so lucky, and so blessed!"

"Daniel, you were gone almost 3 hours. What went on? What happened?" Steve was firing questions at him left and right; and all of his fellow riders were waiting for his answer.

"You'll find out Steve soon enough! You're next ole boy!" and he gave him a huge pat on the shoulder and let out a mighty laugh.

Two days later, Steve's dragon called him to the hatching grounds. When he entered he saw the broken pieces of shell lying about. He looked all around trying to accustom his eyes to the dark. He heard her in the rear of the chamber.

Hello? It's me, Steve. Where are you? She stepped into the light filtering into the cave. *Oh my God! You're beautiful!* Steve was so overcome that he went to his knees still staring up at her. Her color was a dark green shade; she had silver down her back and around the ridges of her eyes, with a touch of purple. Her eyes were brown suspended in a pool of yellow. She was not as big as Jake, but she was big, 18-20 feet at least, and still growing.

She reared back and spread her wings and laid her head down at Steve's feet. *I am a Warrior Dragon of the First – you are my companion, my rider and my friend. I am Lady Elzbeth! Aha, you have a good, quick mind; we will get along just fine. Now, before I can go and stuff my face, we must do this last thing.*

She raised her head a bit and stared directly into Steve's eyes. A beam of energy passed thru them both as knowledge was shared and a lifelong bond was sealed. As with Daniel, the change began to take place as Steve was raised into the air and Lady Elzbeth wrapped her wings about him. After an hour she placed him on the ground again.

You are gorgeous darling, absolutely gorgeous! He was crying, overwrought with emotion.

Of course I am, I am a Dragon of the First! Now I must go and present myself to Jake and his Queen; and then I shall go feed. I will return in two days. With that Lady Elzbeth bent, spread her wings and glided out of the cave.

Steve stood there trying to catch his breath. After a bit he pulled himself together and left the cave. He headed down to the Hall. As he came down the last path, Daniel noticed the swagger in his walk and the changes in his appearance. He understood what was propelling him. It was a momentous occasion.

“So Steve how was it? You were gone for two hours! What did you get? Steve? They threw questions at him all at once.

Steve looked at Daniel and smiled. “Her name is Elzbeth, Lady Elzbeth. She's a Warrior Dragon to the First. And she's fucking gorgeous! She's dark green, rich dark green. She has silver on the ridges down her back, and also around her eyes, with purple thrown in. She has the most beautiful brown eyes you ever saw. God she's beautiful!”

Daniel smiled for him, patted him on the back, “Congratulations Steve!” Kate leaned over and gave him a hug. He was oblivious to everything.

So it went for the next week. One at a time, the eggs hatched and called to their riders. Men and women were seen rushing up the mountainside. Kate noticed that they hatched in pairs. The female, then the male, each pairing couple matched perfectly.

Lady Ashley was called next. She entered the cave and listened intently for any sound. Her eyes were adjusting to the dark when she saw him and went to her knees. He was a large dark forest green color. He has the silver markings on his back and around his eyes that marked him as part of Jake's army.

My Lady Ashley, there you are. My Amazon Princess! You are quite beautiful. I am Daowyn, Warrior to the First. You are my companion, my friend, and my rider. He rose up and presented his head to her. She stroked him and cried. He raised his head and the bonding between them began. A real take charge type of dragon. She was overcome with emotion.

You are wonderful! So big, so fantastic! She was sobbing and with tears of joy.

Of course I am. Would you not want the best for your companion and rider for life? I must go and present myself to the First, and his Queen. Then I will feed, and return to you in two days.

Ashley was befuddled when she descended the mountain tears streaming down her face. Steve took her in his arms knowing what she was going thru. She soon calmed down and relayed the wondrous news of Daowyn's arrival.

Then Jerry was called. He went like a shot up the mountain. His dragon was exactly as he envisioned. She was a deep rich brick red color, with silver on the ridges around her eyes. And eyes black as night in a sea of yellow. She said her name was Lady Olivia – Warrior Dragon to the First. She said he was her companion, her rider, and her friend. She liked him, and was fascinated by his personality. She was pleased to finally meet him. When he came down the mountain he was smiling and crying. Like the others, it took a while for him to calm down. "She's a real little lady. Just you wait till you'll see her!"

Beth was called that evening. They were at dinner when she suddenly stood up. "I have to go!" was all she said. They all knew what that meant. She looked at Jerry, smiled, and she was off. She entered the cave and looked about. She was hoping that she wouldn't faint.

You will not faint my Lady Beth, for you are a strong woman, a fighter as I am. Come forward so I may meet you at last. She stepped forward and beheld her lifelong friend for the first time. He was a deep dark brick-red color; there were silver ridges down his back and around his eyes with the purple that marked him as part of the First's army. He was huge, 20 feet at least. He bent his massive body and laid his head at her feet. *I am a Warrior of the First – I am called Rhontin. And you are just as I pictured. A beauty of stature and grace! You are my companion, my rider, and my friend. I am well pleased!* As Beth stared into his eyes everything around them disappeared. She was engulfed in a bright light and their bonding took place with the sharing of knowledge and more. His wing wrapped around her and it was during this time that her spirit was healed. She felt a great weight lifted from her and was overcome with happiness.

Two and a half hours later she came down the mountain. Her steps were sure footed, and with purpose. She was crying still, but it was out of happiness. Her change was the same as the others. She bore that air of great confidence and purpose. Jerry took her in his arms and held her as she related the joyous news of her dragon to the others.

Collin was called the next morning at sunrise. Becky was the only one that knew he had been called. At breakfast she told the others. Collin walked in an hour later. He was ecstatic. "She's beautiful, just perfect! We've been talking for so long; it was great to see her at last. She's a blue, almost gray,

with the silver like the others - a Warrior to the First. Her name is Maya, Lady Maya. She knows I have the 'sight', and she says it will help us in battle. God, she's great!

Then there was nothing for the rest of the day. Becky knew she would be next and she was getting worried that something was wrong with her dragon. Jake calmed her and told her that he just need more time to grow. She continued her chores for that day, and when they met for dinner she wasn't very hungry. Collin started to say something, then thought better and didn't.

The next morning just as they were finishing up breakfast, Becky jumped up and shouted, "He's here! Gotta go!" and rushed out of the Hall. They all laughed knowing the excitement she was feeling. She rushed up to the cave and burst in huffing and puffing. She let her eyes adjust, and looked about. There was one egg on the hatching ground. She heard movement towards the back and stepped forward.

My Lady Becky, my wonderful friend, there you are! He stepped forward and she saw him at last. He was a deep dark blue with silver on the ridges of his back and about his eyes, a dab of purple thrown in for good measure. Black eyes like the night, suspended in silver pearl.

Oh my God, you are.... magnificent! You are more than I ever imagined! You are gorgeous!

Of course I am! He reared up and bent and laid his head at her feet. She went to her knees. *I am a Warrior Dragon of the First – my name is Jared. You are my rider, my companion, my friend. We are here to serve.* She stroked his head and cried and told him he was her salvation too. He raised his head and stared into her eyes and the bonding began. An hour and a half later she came down the mountain floating on air. She was overcome with emotion. Collin tenderly put his arm about her and held her for a bit till she calmed. She related the good news to everyone; and received congratulations from all.

The last was Sally. They all knew it would be a momentous event. She would go up the mountain as a child, but would return as a young woman. Jake had told them that much. Michael was hovering protectively near her, but she wasn't affected like the others. All the time she had spent with Jake and with Michael had prepared her. She was ready, looking forward to it. She had prepared some clothes to take with her, as instructed by Jake. She carried them with her everywhere.

Kate had sent Michael on several errands and the others to do their chores. "Give the girl some breathing space, guys!" Sally laughed at Kate's dilemma, thinking it fun.

Two days later as they were standing there talking, Oreo came out of the Hall and up to Sally. She meowed loudly, patted Sally's leg and ran up the mountain. Sally looked at Daniel and Kate.

A big smile erupted across her face. "See you guys later!" And she followed Oreo up the mountain.

Michael wondered why Kate has sent him on this stupid errand. Then he realized she was just giving Sally a chance to breathe. They were like a bunch of mother hens hovering over her. She was strong, and he had prepared her well for what was to take place. She had trusted him; and now he was going to have to trust her. He finished his chore and headed back, he saw Kate and Daniel as he landed.

"She's gone to the mountain Michael," Kate informed him as his eyes flew wide. "Now we wait."

Up above Sally entered the hatching ground and let her eyes adjust to the dark. She placed her clothes on the ground and walked forward. She could hear Oreo meowing, and then purring loudly.

Your little furry companion knows no fear My Lady. She knows who I am. Please come forward so we may meet properly. A deep rich masculine voice called to her.

Sally could feel her heart beating rapidly, she moved forward to the inner cave. Oreo ran to her and rubbed against her leg and then sat quietly. Sally closed her eyes, and stepped forward again. She opened them and looked up. Before her stood the biggest dragon she had ever seen. He was bigger than Lady Jennie, but not quite as big as Jake. He was more than what she expected. He was a deep dark chocolate brown; shiny and glistening. He had the same silver on the ridges down his back and around his eyes accented with the purple. Oh what eyes! Deep rich brown suspended in a sea of gold.

I am Rah, First Wing to Jake, Mate to Lady Jennie. You are my companion, chosen by Jake. You are my rider and my friend. We bow to no one, but Jake. He reared up and laid his head at her feet. She reached out and touched him, and a charge of electricity shot thru her.

Rah raised his head so their eyes met. Transfixed she felt the charge build up and saw the energy passing thru them. Then she felt herself rising, she saw his huge wings wrap around her. She felt the electric charge shoot thru her body, but she wasn't afraid. She could feel something happening to her. A beam of light encircled her head and went to Rah and back to her. They merged as one. She felt another charge of electricity, light filled the cavern; her clothing fell away in shreds. She was suspended in the air, slowly turning around within Rah's great wings. Her mind was flooded with images; all the people she knew, dragons she had yet to meet, an enormous amount of information; all the dragons chanting her name; Michael standing before her. *Behold your mate who loves you.* Michael held his arms open and she moved towards him. Time stood still and they were engulfed in a beam of light. She could see their future together. She could feel Michael holding her; she wanted to remain like that, suspended forever in his arms. A mighty roar from Rah brought her back to her senses. She felt renewed, filled with love for this wonderful creature. Gently he placed her back on the ground.

Then he turned and stared at Oreo; a beam of light shot out to Oreo and she rose up and was engulfed in Rah's wings. Loud purring could be heard coming from the both of them. A half hour later he placed her on the ground, and chuckled. She was changed too! She was larger than Tabs & Ash; she had been enhanced like Sally!

I must go and present myself to the First, and his Queen. I shall feed and then return in two days. I am well pleased in you Lady Sally; you have much courage. As does the fur ball! He went to the opening and bent over, spread his wings, and glided out of the cave.

Sally sat for a moment. Then she took the time to inspect her new body, what she could see of it at least. She took the clothing that Beth had given her and quickly dressed. She did not know it yet, but she was beautiful. *I just hope that they recognize me,* she thought to herself.

She looked at Oreo, ruffled her fur and hugged her, “wait till they see you!” She and Oreo started down the mountain. It had been almost four hours since she had left. As they emerged from the opening and came down the last path there was an audible gasp from those below. She hesitated for a moment. Then she continued with her head held high; her Rah was First Wing!

For those below the sight before them was ethereal. Sally’s physical change was nothing short of phenomenal. She was about 5’2” when she left; now before them stood a 5’5” beauty. Her hair had doubled in length, the white streak thickened, framing her face. The scar she had hated for so long now accentuated her lovely face. Her body was perfect, tall, lithe, well formed and muscular. Any man would consider himself indeed fortunate to receive a smile from so lovely a young woman. The Sally they all knew was still there; she was just hidden beneath the smile of this lovely young woman.

But the sight that took them all by surprise was the size of Oreo. She was as big as a tiger, probably larger by half. She pranced by Sally’s side as if she were still a kitten, tail in the air.

Michael stared openmouthed at Sally as she made her way down. *God Jake, she’s beautiful.*

Of course she is Michael, would I give you a mate that was not beautiful? She has gone thru the first phase very well. Go to her, she needs to rest now.

Michael went to her as she stepped off the last landing to the ground. He held out his arm to her and as she placed her hand on it he felt an electric shock throughout his body.

“You’re beautiful, Sally, unbelievable... absolutely gorgeous!” Michael was staring so intently at her that the others were getting uncomfortable. He put his arm around her protectively, and led her over to the others.

Steve piped up quickly, “And look at Oreo, she was changed too! This is amazing, wait till the twins see her!”

“His name is Rah; he’s First Wing to Jake.” Sally said in a silky deep voice looking about at everyone. “He’s Jake’s second in command.” She turned in her happiness and grabbed Michael by both arms, “Oh Michael, he is so beautiful, so magnificent! You won’t believe till you see for yourself; Lady Jennie is going to be well pleased I can tell you!

Do you hear Lady Jennie; he is a wonderful mate for you. His name is Rah. Michael told her.

I must wait till he presents himself to Jake, and feeds before I can see him. It will be two days! Please keep me busy during that time My Michael, so it passes quickly.

I shall try my friend, he assured her.

Daniel and Kate came forward. Kate gave Sally a big hug and Daniel scratched Oreo’s rather large head. She purred, loudly, and rubbed against Daniel almost knocking him down.

“She’s the size of a tiger,” he blurted out, “Oh, the twins are going to have a surprise next time they decide to chase her!” Everyone laughed at the thought of Oreo chasing the twins around.

“Michael, I’m suddenly very tired, the change took a lot more out of me than I thought. Can we go home; I want to rest for a little?” With that statement Sally accepted Michael as her mate; a fact not lost on the others. “Kate, will you please tell Sam and Lucy I will come and see them after I have rested?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll let them know you are all right, you go. We’ll talk later Sally.” She leaned close and whispered, “you’re a beautiful young woman Sally, absolutely beautiful.”

Sally smiled at Kate and bid her a silent ‘thank-you’ shaking her head.

Michael called for Lady Jennie to take them home. She landed, and as they mounted, Oreo jumped on one of the seats that Steve had made for the ‘twins’; and they took off.

My Michael, Oreo has changed also. She chuckled loudly; this should be interesting. Very interesting indeed!

In the end, they were all pleased. Jake said the dragons were a good brood. They would serve well. Now all that remained was the ‘first flight’.

Things are going well. He crooned to his queen. We will be ready by spring to begin cleaning this planet of those vermin.

Yes my love, purred Queenie, you are most wise.

Kate went to the Great Hall to inform Sam and Lucy that Sally had gone thru the change and she was spent; she had gone home with Michael to rest for a while. She would come and see them when she woke.

“Well, I can’t think of a better husband for her than Michael,” Sam said cheerfully trying to ease Lucy’s pain. “I always said he was a fine young man. But it will take some getting used to, you understand.”

“My little girl is all grown up,” sobbed Lucy.

“Lucy,” Kate began, “she is a beautiful, stunning young woman now; wait till you see her.”

“She will always be my little girl Kate,” she sobbed as she leaned against Sam. “You above all others knows what she meant to me; she was the child I could never have. And now she is all grown...” She buried her face in Sam’s shirt.

“Ah, my Lucy, you should be proud of her,” Sam told her gently. “She has done something wonderful. And she did it willingly, just as Michael did. They are well suited for each other.”

Kate left the Hall and sought out Daniel. They walked the camp, talking to people and seeing that all was well. “Daniel, do you think when people see the change in Sally that they will come forward then, wanting to be riders.”

“I think that some will, but not enough. Jake said that we needed at least thirty riders before spring. I hope he knows where we are going to get them,” he told her.

“Oh I wouldn’t worry about that. Jake has had a plan all along. We were just the beginning of it; I’m sure he already knows where to get them.” She snuggled against him, “It’s really been getting cold these past few nights. We are in for a snow storm I think.”

Daniel smiled, held her to him and kissed her on the forehead. “Let’s go home my love; I think I know how to keep you warm.” As they ran up the mountain to their cave, a deep throaty chuckle could be heard echoing throughout the valley.

Yes Daniel, do not concern yourself, Jake purred to himself. I have been preparing the riders for some time now. They will be ready when the eggs arrive.

Several hundred miles away, set deep in the woods on the outskirts of a small town in upper Michigan, stood a very special private school; The Osborne School for the Gifted. It had stood for over one hundred years. It had produced titans of industry; leaders of legend, and far thinking scientists who provided this country the advances she enjoyed. It was geared for the very young; the young geniuses who would someday come of age and run this world of ours. They would control the businesses and countries that shaped the world.

A great number of these students were seven, eight, and nine years old. The teachers and professors of Osborne knew better than to underestimate the intelligence of these students simply because of their ages. They were all very self sufficient, and were left on their own many times to finish their lessons at their own speed.

When the dragons first came and began burning, most of the professors panicked and fled, leaving the students alone to face their fate. It was a time of great confusion, great terror, and mind-numbing fear. Screams could be heard throughout the woods, and more than one student saw what became of their fleeing teachers.

Two professors chose to remain with the students, John Hudson, 31, a biology and sciences teacher; and Alexandria Grissom, 33, a math and history teacher. They gathered up all the students they could find and herded them below into the underbelly of the ancient school. There they waited for 8 long days, until the burning stopped, and the dragons flew over no more. The old cellar proved to be the perfect place to hide. It ran the length of the old school, and after two days without food, they had no problem finding the kitchen area. Food was foremost in everyone's mind. Several of the older boys squeezed their way up thru the flooring and found the school pantry. There was plenty of food, and much they could use amid the debris.

In the years since, they had not had a repeat of that attack. The two professors continued to teach, but they threw in an extra course – survival; teaching the students to use their wits and their knowledge. They gave great leeway to the students, thus instilling great confidence. They had 20 students, eleven boys and nine girls.

And of course, they had the dreams, the dreams of the dragons.

Over the years the students had analyzed the dreams carefully, had taken each person's variation and blended it with the others. A story began to emerge; a story of what was to take place in the future. They all knew, believed with total conviction, that they were destined for something great. Something far greater than anything they could imagine; and it involved riding the dragons of their dreams.

The students were now 14, 15, and 16 years old. They all thought of John and Alex as their parents. The teachers had protected them, and taken loving care of them over the years. They had taught them everything there was to know about math, physics, the sciences and the history of man. They allowed their minds to expand on a variety of subjects, especially ESP and telepathy.

Then came the day when Jason, the oldest of the students, heard Jake for the first time. He listened carefully to all that Jake told him. He agreed with Jake on many points, and argued with him on others. When Jake asked if he felt his destiny was to ride a dragon and fight the black devils, Jason knew he had been right all along. He wanted Jake to come and get them all right away, but Jake told

him to be patient; they would come for them soon. Jason tried to tell all the others, tell them that Jake was real and would come for them. They laughed at him, said he was delusional, and they didn't believe him. By the next morning after being chastised in their dreams, they believed him.

10

The snowstorms hit the mountain with a vengeance, and covered everything in a blanket of white. The temperature dropped to below freezing. It was damn cold in the caves and Daniel would have none of it. He remembered what Steve and Jerry had told him and quickly decided to put them to work on getting heat to the caves. They were only too glad to have something to do. It took them both two weeks, as Jerry had predicted, but was most welcome by the time they were finished.

Daniel and Kate spent the cold mornings snuggled up in bed. He enjoyed this private time with her. They would talk about the coming war, and about how well their riders and dragons were doing. Daniel would try to guess what Jake was up to; what plans he had in play, much to Kate's admonishments to let it go. And of course they talked of each other, which always led to Daniel caressing Kate. She wouldn't let him go after that until they made love; so their mornings were a little longer than the others.

The Dragons were warm in the big cave above. They spent most of their time flying in formation with Jake, training, diving and flaming at the same time. They had all grown much larger, and their wings had taken on a definite muscular tone. It would not be long before they would begin 'First Flight' with their riders.

Thru her discussions with Jeffery, Miss Susan had seen the need for warm clothing for the riders when they were in flight. She had come up with an idea and discussed it with Jeffery. He praised her for her foresight, and with his blessing she embarked on her mission. With Jake's help, Miss Susan had gone to the warehouse and searched for large long leather coats. Finding what she needed, she got out her old sewing machine and proceeded to make riding jackets and helmets for the dragon riders. Using a hot etching gun she emblazoned the outline of a dragon on the back of each jacket. When she was finished she asked the riders to meet her one night after dinner on the mesa top. She stepped on the mesa with Jeffery carrying a large box. Smiling she quietly told the riders what she had done, and proceeded to present her gifts to the riders. The riders were amazed at the workmanship and the intricate detail; she had obviously worked long and hard on these garments. It was a labor of love on her part, and they all understood. After this, Miss Susan was regarded with new respect.

As the weeks wore on, Daniel made use of the extra time by organizing the riders and suggesting that they all become proficient with the use of crossbows. He was convinced that this could help them when they were in battle. Daniel explained his thoughts to the riders concluding with the fact that he knew, 'we can't penetrate their hide, but if we could get a lucky shot and take out one of their eyes, then we would stand a better chance fighting them.' Most agreed with him.

Jerry came up with rigging that they could use while flying. It would allow the riders mobility and at the same time keep them from falling off the dragons while they used the crossbows in flight. Using Lady Jennie as a test dragon, they tried the rigging out on her. She said it was not constricting and Michael said it worked very well.

During this time some of the people in camp had asked if they could relocate to the town. They felt they would be safe there, no marauders had been seen for some time. After discussing it among themselves, the riders felt that this was inevitable. The big house would be kept for the riders use only.

Sam said he would go to keep an eye on them. So they made him the Mayor of the town; and he and about fifty of their number left. The power was turned on and they settled themselves in for the winter. Everything seemed to settle down and things were going along okay. Two and a half months passed and all seemed well. Except for the occasional flights for food, contact with the town was on a minimal basis for the dragon riders.

On a recent run, Kate and Daniel noticed a change in attitude between the camp and the town folk. Words were said, the harmony they had once shared as a group seemed to be fading. There was some sort of resentment brewing. They spent several days at the big house trying to track down the cause. They could find nothing to put their finger on, but it continued to gain strength. Kate decided to say something to Jake. That evening she and Daniel returned to the mountain and immediately called for a meeting to speak to Jake about it. As she was telling Jake, Kate could see that he was getting very agitated, his eyes were twirling and he grunted several times.

Leave me my lady, I must think carefully of this turn of events. Kate and Daniel returned to their quarters and tried to rest. Throughout the night they could hear Jake as he paced about the large mesa deep in thought.

Dawn rose on a weary Kate and Daniel, needless to say they did not get much rest. They returned to the top, but Jake was gone. Kate called to him and received a short and curt 'busy right now, will talk to you later' from Jake. She and Daniel decided to go below to breakfast and go about their chores. They tried to keep things as normal as possible. Jake and his whereabouts played on their minds, but Daniel finally prevailed with Kate by explaining that Jake would fill them in as soon as he returned.

It was close to dinnertime when Kate spied him returning to the mesa. He called to them both and asked them to come to the top. As they stepped out onto the mesa they saw Sam climbing off of Jake's back.

Ah, my friends, Jake called to them, come, I have much news to discuss with you both. I went to the town and called for Sam. I explained what you told me about the problem in the town

Sam joined the conversation; *Yeah, I was going to contact Jake tonight. There's something happening that I don't like it one bit. It took me a while to figure it out, but when I did I figured that Jake should be told quick. A man came in several weeks ago. He seemed all right at first, now, I'm not so sure. I can't put my finger on what it is exactly, but I know he's responsible. He says things, negative things, but always adding 'it's not for me to say.' The others listen to him; he's making trouble on purpose. Jake, it's almost like he's trying to turn the townfolk against you and the riders.*

The Insane Ones have sent him. I will not have this happening to my people! Jake spoke in anger, unusual for him. *This is why I had to leave you my lady. I had to get to the bottom of this quickly. The black devil that rules the insane ones has made use of a damaged human; one who is mad. This is how they operate, they try to cause dissention and anger among the people, and then they attack.* Jake rose up and turned to Sam; *where would he be at this time of day?*

I'm not too sure; he seems to disappear in the late afternoon. But later tonight he will be out walking; he always walks up to the big house in the evenings. He walks a lot at night, and he is always alone.

He won't be tonight, not for long! Jake roared, *Rah, I have need of your services!* Jake called to his second in command. *After the sun goes down, seek out this creature and bring him here quickly and silently.*

I do as you command my liege; Rah bowed his large head and took off seconds later. He explained to his rider, Lady Sally, what Jake had asked and that this was a very dangerous mission. She thumped

him on his nose and told him she was his rider; no matter what the mission she was coming along and he better get used to it!

Jake called all the riders to the summit after dinner. They were filled in on what had been happening down below. 30 minutes after sunset Lady Sally called to Jake. She informed them that she and Rah were returning with the man; and to be prepared. As they landed all understood her warning.

If ever there was a human in the throes of insanity, they were all staring at him. He was unwashed and unkempt in appearance. His eyes were red rimmed and bloodshot. His dirt embedded nails were long and several were broken, as tho they were ripped off. His hair was matted, and his clothes reeked. He was spewing curses and saying the vilest of things. Most of these he directed at Jake, and Kate. He showed no fear of Rah; he seemed to be in a trance-like state; as if he were speaking for someone else. Rah literally dropped him on the mesa where Big John and Steve waited. He continued spitting out vile things until Big John popped him on the head. It was only then that he seemed to become cognizant and aware of his surroundings. He saw Kate and immediately took a step in her direction only to be blocked by Big John. He began to scream at her and call her vile names.

Daniel slowly removed his crossbow from his shoulder; murder in his eyes. *Let me rid us of this evil piece of shit!*

Not yet Daniel, Jake stopped him. I would find out what this creature knows. Jake turned towards Collin and nodded, Collin, now is the time to do as I have instructed you.

Steve and Jerry dragged the man over to a large bolder and placed him on it. They held the man down, as Collin positioned himself above the man and stared into his eyes; then into the heart of him. He placed his hand on the man's head. The poor creature shook all over, protesting, screaming vile things. Collin knelt and probed thru this creature to the one controlling him. Collin turned white as a ghost and his face took on a hard tone. While all this was taking place, Jake's dragons had gathered above and were circling the mesa. After several long minutes, Collin stood and shakily went to the side of the boulder and retched.

Collin looked up at Jake, *Kill him now Jake, do it quickly.*

Knowing what was coming; the creature scrambled off the boulder, taking Steve by surprise, and went for Kate. He was stopped dead in his tracks by Daniel, who loosed an arrow into the poor wretch's head ending his vile possession. Rah flamed the corpse to ash immediately. No one was sorry.

Collin took a deep breath. *You were right, he was sent by the leader of the devils, a big black bull. They know we are here Jake; the emergence of your Queen was the signal. They picked it up in the ether. They needed to know exactly where we were located; and Jake, they intend to kill your Queen. They know who you are and they are afraid, very afraid. I don't know when they will try an attack, but I believe it will be soon.*

Jake threw back his head and let loose a mighty bellow. *Warriors!* He called to all his dragons above, *Are you strong enough for your riders?*

All the dragons bellowed as one and roared their answer. *Yes!*

Riders, go to your homes and gather your riding gear! Return quickly, for tonight you will all take your First Flight! Jake commanded.

The riders left at a dead run. Each went to their cave and put on their leather flying clothes, and leather gloves. All returned within a half hour and they were all carrying weapons.

You will need no weapons for this flight, Jake informed them. This must be done in the Light; you will understand when you return. Now Riders, go to your Dragon and mount. Lady Jennie and I will remain here to guard the camp. Rah, you know what has to take place during First Flight. I leave it to you to see that it is accomplished quickly and safely.

My Liege, I am honored. Rah called Sally to him quickly.

When you return scout the area from on high. Look to the West first. Daowyn, you will look to the East. I do not feel them on wing yet; but that can change quickly. Now go, and Gods speed go with you all!

They rose in unison, banked to the right and were gone in minutes. Anyone standing on the ground would have a sight to tell his or her children and grandchildren. Jake and Lady Jennie with Kate and Michael rose and disappeared into the night sky

Picking up on the fear that Kate was feeling, Jake calmed her. *My Lady, do not concern your self, they will be just fine. I am pleased that you recognized what was going on down below. We would have been caught off guard had they attacked now.*

Jake, can you explain how you knew that man was from them, she asked him intently.

Love My Lady, pure simple love. From the very beginning when you first found me and we bonded, did not a great love developed between us? Kate shook her head in ascent. The foundation of the entire camp was built on love and trust. These are positive things, pure things. As the other dragons hatched, that love was spread. Each night I filled the dreams of the camp with love and understanding. They accepted us without question. They trusted us, cared a great deal for us, and respected the riders. This is as it should be. Does not everyone who comes here say it feels so good, so positive?

Kate thought about it for a moment, yes, your right Jake, we all feel it.

Jake then continued, *When one of the Insane Ones is among us, there is nothing but hate, distrust, and negativity. They thrive on hate and darkness. When you came to me and told me what you were observing, it became apparent to me that a great evil had descended upon the town. I went to the town and saw a great darkness emanating from it, and so I sought out Sam. I knew we had to get rid of it immediately. I will send dreams to the townsfolk, they will realize that the man was bad, and believe that he simply left.*

Should they return to the mountain Jake? Kate was alarmed, are they in any danger?

I am not sure just yet, My Lady. They may have to return for safety's sake, we shall see.

Jake, Lady Jennie was calling him, I can feel something approaching. Just one, a scout I believe. My Michael and I can take her; she is half our size.

Do so then, quickly! Jake ordered.

Kate watched as Lady Jennie banked to the left and took off at supersonic speed and went straight up. *My God she's so fast!* She was looking for the intruder when she saw a flash of fire and heard a

terrible screech. A large black flaming mass came falling out of the clouds. It was followed immediately by a brown streak shooting flames at it as it dropped to the ground.

It is done my Liege, nothing remains but ashes. Lady Jennie added, my Michael gives me a strong flame!

Michael was in heaven, Yahoo! Did you see us? Whew, that was great!

Continue your patrol, but in the heights, Jake instructed them. There may be more of them. Michael and Lady Jennie flew above quickly.

You see My Lady our one advantage over them is that we can feel when they are near. They cannot do the same. They will not attack in the daytime; they prefer the cover of darkness to do their hideous work.

Kate and Jake stayed up the rest of the night patrolling the skies. There were no further incursions. Lady Jennie and Michael found no more dragons lurking anywhere. At dawn, as the sun was rising over the mountaintops, Kate could see a large wing of dragons coming their way. *Jake, is that them?*

They return My Lady. Prepare yourself, for they have all changed. They are now the Riders of Light. You and I have one more flight to take, with Daniel and my Queen.

Kate watched as they all flew in and dismounted. They came forward as a group with Daniel in the lead. Jake was right, they had changed. They were all a mightier version of the people she knew, they were strong, glowing with an inner force that made them more than they were. Daniel, and the men all appeared much younger; more muscular, their faces beautiful to behold. Daniel's features were like chiseled marble. His long mane flowing in the wind, he looked like a mighty king leading his warriors. His gaze was that of a man on a mission. The others bore the same resemblance to him. Each one was enhanced beyond what they used to be.

Jake, Daniel called, Michael and Lady Jennie killed one? Are they so bold as to think they can come here! Daniel was livid. We will destroy them and strike them down.

Calm yourself Daniel. It was handled quickly and efficiently. But we must be prepared for this to happen again. They know of our existence now, and they will mount an attack against us; we must be ready. Daowyn and Lady Elzbeth, you and your riders will fly patrol the remainder of the day. Fly to the heights, they cannot go there. You will be able to see the skies all around us. Warn if you detect anything unusual. Collin, I require your services. We meet in the great Riders Hall I have made on the far side of the mountain. Follow please, all of you.

They mounted their dragons again and followed Jake around the side of the mountain. It was indeed a Riders Hall. It was big enough for all the dragons to enter with their riders. It was obvious that Jake had been planning and preparing for this for some time. They all entered and dismounted.

Kate went to Daniels side and he took her hand grinning, "My love, I fear that we have begun the battle of our lives!"

Jake called the riders around him. *We must be on alert at all times, Jake began; Kate and Daniel picked up on it this time. We were lucky; they will not take us by surprise again. If any of you get the slightest feeling that all is not right, sound the alarm to your dragons. Any strangers approaching this area are to be brought before me, and Collin. Rah, my Queen must be protected from this day forward. They will try to kill her before we can mate.*

They will not get the chance, Jake. Lady Jennie and I will protect her, my Liege.

I have every confidence in you Rah. Rhontin and Lady Olivia, you will fly patrol at sunset. Your color will shield you from their eyes. As I told the others, go to the heights and scan the skies. They may send a scout to check us out first.

He turned around and spoke to all the Riders and Dragons; Now, all of you hear me well, if an attack does come, you are to return and do battle quickly. They are half our size and their flame is no match for ours. We can make short work of them.

There was much boasting among the Dragons and their Riders.

Jake continued; my fear right now is that they will try to harm the town first. Lady Kate, you were right. They must return to the mountain for safety's sake. I will give them dreams to make them want to return. I will also inform Sam of what is happening. He will get them moving.

Jake now moved to the center of the room and turned to Collin. Collin, you must go into a trance and see what you can find out. I have taught you how to control and direct your ability. Now is the time to use it.

Collin lay down on a large boulder in the center of the floor of the great Hall. He closed his eyes and slowed his breathing. He was soon under and stayed that way for over an hour. What he saw can only be imagined. He was in hell, and did not want to stay for long. Several times he cried out and thrashed about, Big John had to hold him down. Becky was concerned that he would be hurt. Ashley and Beth went to her and offered comfort as sisters would. Slowly Collin's breathing returned to normal; it slowed and became even, and he started to come around. Again he had to retch to remove the darkness from him.

Jake, ugh, they are being led by a huge black monster. He's full of nothing but hate and blind rage. He has a special hatred for you. You were both in the same hatching ground. The day Kate came and found you, his rider never came. He wants to hurt you really bad. It was very difficult to listen to them; there was so much hate and negativity. They are planning an assault on the town, a quick fly-by to show that they can get close; 2 or 3 days I think. They are coming with twenty or more of their kind. They hope to get the people in the town. And another thing; I barely picked up on this but they are hatching eggs at an accelerated rate. Any of their kind who destroys a hatching ground is killed. They want an army of dragons to fight you. They fear that you will mate with your Queen. It will be the end of them if you do, and they are very aware of that fact. Collin slumped down on the floor.

2 to 3 days you say, hmm, it is enough time; we can do it. Jake turned to Kate, Daniel, Kate, will you please go and pack a small bag with a change of clothes and return quickly. We leave for a day. Rah, I leave you in charge; keep everyone safe. Bring the town into camp; they will want to come when I am finished with them. You all know what you have to do. We shall return in a day with a pregnant Queen!

Kate and Daniel returned within minutes and mounted. They flew out of the cave and headed southeast at supersonic speed. Daniel and Kate knew this was the mating flight for Jake and Queenie. They were both a little apprehensive, but they trusted Jake implicitly.

Jake took them to the southeastern coast. He flew for almost two hours, passing many mountain ranges, and finally ending up in the Carolinas. They flew thru a lot of valleys, and over many green velvet hills. As the sun was shining brightly, Jake set Kate and Daniel off on a grassy knoll in a beautiful meadow. There were no signs of life around, not even a bird could be heard singing; they were completely alone. Then Jake and his Queen took to the air.

Both Kate and Daniel looked around at their surroundings, then at each other. Kate took a good look at Daniel.

“Daniel, I haven’t had a chance to tell you, but you’ve really changed. You’ve become so much more.” Suddenly she felt a deep heat rising from her loins. She looked at Daniel and she wanted him; wanted him inside her, now. She wanted to feel his hands on her body.

“It is most sexy, my lusty warrior king,” her voice had gotten very husky. “I wonder just how much of you has changed.”

Looking at him with pure lust, she shook her hair free, and she began to undress all the while prancing towards him. She threw her clothes down and stood there naked before him, thrusting her hips seductively.

Daniel couldn’t believe what she had just said. He couldn’t believe what she was doing! He looked above and saw Jake was doing the same, prancing towards Queenie. Then he felt a wave of lust hit him. He looked at her coming towards him, and he wanted to take her right then and there. He tore at his clothing to remove them, “let me show you just how much I’ve changed!” he teased her. Then he went for her, but she jumped him first; and they rolled down the hillside. He pinned her to the ground but she leaned forward and pushed him down and rode him wildly.

Daniel could see above as Jake was doing the same to his Queen. He spun her over and pinned her down again and savagely kissed her as he ran his hands over her body. She was all over him; and then he took her again in the same manner as Jake was doing above. He couldn’t get enough of her; it was like a surreal dream, all his senses were at their height, he could actually feel her emotions!

Suddenly it appeared that they were in the air, and he was mounting her again and again. She was playing coy one minute, and attacking him the next. Pretty soon he couldn’t tell where they left off and Jake and Queenie began. On and on it went thru the night. By morning they were spent, totally exhausted.

The light of the rising sun woke Daniel. He rose up and saw Kate lying beside him. Her breathing told him that she was waking also. He rose and found their clothing and gently went to her.

“You had better get dressed my Viking queen,” he said with a sly smile on his face.

He stopped and really looked at her. She had changed during the night. She was still his Kate, only more. Her hair had grown longer, covering her body like a blanket. Her face was younger, and her body was even better that it was before. Her breasts were firmer, her tummy flat, her legs and her arms were more muscular. She appeared to be a young woman in her early 30’s. She stretched seductively.

“Kate, you’ve changed again during the night. My God, you’re even better than before, if that’s possible.” He took her in his arms and kissed her tenderly.

Then they heard the dragons above them again.

Their eyes locked - they smiled - then they lunged for each other.

So it continued all morning. By late afternoon all four of them were totally exhausted. They fell into a deep sleep. When they awoke hours later the moon was rising; they were rested and refreshed, full of energy again.

My friends, we must return; we have to fortify our camp. My Queen has need of the hatching ground. Daniel, you will ride with Kate and me while my Queen is caring for her eggs.

Upon their return they found that the townsfolk were indeed returning to the safety of the mountain. Their fellow Riders immediately noticed the change in Daniel and Kate. There was no doubt as to the leaders of this group. Queenie had headed straight for the hatching grounds and remained there.

In the days that followed there had been no more sightings. The dragons and riders were uneasy, itching for a fight. They covered the skies at night, looking for the slightest movement.

Daniel and Jeffery were at Jake's side constantly; plans were being laid.

Unknown to the others, at first, Oreo stationed herself at the entrance to the hatching grounds. She had picked up on the energy and knew instinctively that this area was to be protected.

At the urging of Michael, and with Jake's permission, Lady Jennie had taken the 'twins' on a special ride. It had lasted only an hour, but the results were what Michael had hoped. The 'twins' were enhanced by the flight; their size was doubled. They were more muscular, with retractable fangs that could rip thru a dragon's hide easily. They were a formidable power to be reckoned with. Upon return from their flight, they followed Oreo to the hatching grounds and stood guard with her.

It was during this time Jake told Jeffrey that he must decide. This was the only time they would have to perform his ride. Jeffrey agreed to the ride, for the good of everyone. Jake called his Dragons to the top of the mountain and after Jeff mounted, they took off. They were gone almost two hours. There was a lot of knowledge to be shared among them all. When they returned, there was indeed a change. Jeff looked like a man in his 40's. His hair was a thick salt and pepper color as was his beard. He had taken on a muscular form but not bulky. Intelligent eyes peered out in front of a brain that held a vast amount of knowledge. He silently thought to himself: *Miss Susan will like the change.*

Riders kept in touch with each other thru Jake. Steve had suggested a ring of explosives be placed around the camp in case the Insane Ones tried to use the mutant bears against the camp. It would prove to be a very good idea.

Sam had pulled everyone into the mess hall and informed of what was taking place. The hall would be used as their refuge, cots were placed everywhere. They all knew that once the battle was on, this was the one place all would be safe. Steve and Jerry trained the men below in the use of the weapons they had. The entire camp was secured; all was in readiness, now they waited.

Up above, Jeffrey called the riders and laid out his plan of attack. Using his great knowledge of History, he called upon the battle plans of the great Zulu warrior kings.

Just like a buffalo's horns, he told them confidently; we pull them in, close behind them and blast them to hells. I doubt they will understand what is happening to them till it is too late. We can take them out quickly, Jake. But first we need bait to pull them in, an injured dragon perhaps, trying to fly home?

Very good, Jeffery! This is an excellent plan. Jake looked about the chamber at his dragons. *Master Steve, Lady Elizabeth, do you both think you are up to being the bait for our trap?*

We are honored my Liege, Lady Elzbeth answered, we shall be so weak and injured that they will come at us with drooling mouths. Steve grinned broadly at the thought of battle.

Collin rushed into the chamber his eyes wide. *They are coming! They have taken to wing. The big one stays behind. Jake, these are a suicide band, cause as much destruction as possible, 'die well' he tells them.*

Riders to your dragons! Jake boomed, be alert!

Daniel and Kate mounted Jake and they took to the skies. Dragons and riders, flying as one, went to the heights and hovered over the camp and surrounding area.

Down below Sam saw them take off and sounded the alarm. Everyone immediately sought the shelter of the large Hall. Boulders were rolled into place, and men were placed at the entrance with their weapons at the ready. An eerie silence filled the camp.

The big black bull had indeed made use of the mutant bears. The silence below was suddenly broken as several rounds of explosives went off and six of the ugly monsters burst into the camp snarling and growling. Then more came bursting thru the brush, destroying everything in their path. They sensed the people in the large Hall and attacked it with a vengeance. The men opened fire cutting them to bits one by one, but still they came. While they were kept busy with this battle, a very large monstrous grizzly started up the mountain to the hatching grounds. His gruesome task was to destroy all the eggs and anything else he found there. The Queen was to be destroyed if possible.

As it approached the landing and started forward it was not prepared for what faced it. The 'twins' barred the way to the chamber. Growling and snarling they were a fierce sight that would have frightened the bravest of men. They stood their ground with Oreo behind. The monstrous thing growled and reared up; the 'twins' attacked in unison, momentarily throwing it off guard. Ash got a hold on its throat ripping and tearing at it with his powerful fangs. The beast thrashed and twisted his powerful body, but Ash would not let go. Oreo leaped on its back clawing and slashing it to the bone. It put up a terrible fight biting and tearing at the 'twins,' but they would not let up or give it any reprieve. The three fierce defenders finally managed to overpower it and bring it down. But the price was a heavy one as Ash fell to the ground mortally wounded. Tabs, bleeding heavily from several deep wounds, held it down. The sight of Ash lying there motionless in a pool of blood threw Oreo into a rage. She pounced upon the thing tearing and slicing; her strength had increased in size to match that of her rage. She tore off its head and threw it over the side of the mountain and then stood there surveying the damage.

Oreo went to her friends' side meowing piteously. She tried unsuccessfully to stem the flow of blood from Ash's wounds. As he died both Oreo and Tabs let out their grief and a great howling went up that shook the entire mountain and echoed throughout the valley.

A spent Oreo went to the Queen howling out her grief. The Queen let loose a bolt of energy knocking her down. She howled again and shakily stood up, with renewed strength and vengeance in her heart. She shook herself off and turned and made her way from the hatching grounds. Slowly she made her way down the mountain. Gradually she began to pick up speed. One more slobbering, growling mutant bear tried to make it up the mountain; she destroyed it immediately in the same manner as the first. Dripping now with the blood of these foul creatures, she headed for the great Hall.

The men below were firing, killing them as fast as they could, but more kept emerging from the brush. Oreo saw them and her rage was renewed as she leapt off the lower landing and dived into the midst of

them. She went into a killing frenzy; ripping paws, legs, throats, severing heads; her rage allowed her to destroy them all. There was nothing left but blood, and great swatches of fur. She stood over the last one, panting, and howled a deep mournful wail.

You have done very well my furry friend, Rah was speaking to her, calming her again. Breathe, calm yourself, now return to the Queen, protect and stay with her till we come for you. Oreo meowed and headed back up the mountain, purring loudly.

In the Hall, the men could scarcely believe what they had seen. The hair on their necks was still standing at the sound of the chilling wail they heard coming from Oreo. Sam was dumbfounded by the actions of the great cat. That she had saved their lives, there was no doubt. Now all that remained was the battle in the skies.

Rah had relayed to all briefly, what had taken place below. Sally felt pride in what Oreo had done, but sadness for Michael. The twins were his friends from the beginning; the loss of Ash would weigh heavy on his heart. But mourning must wait for they had a job to do. As they hovered above, they made out the outline of the dragons headed their way from the west. There were 35 of them.

Lady Elzbeth, I believe that you are injured, so sad my dear. Jake chuckled.

Lady Elzbeth dove below. She flapped a broken wing, trying to fly away from the approaching dragons. She would speed up and then slow, feigning difficulty in keeping up her speed. They spotted her and increased their speed immediately. She was weaving back and forth, looking over her shoulder. Steve made like he was urging her on, and at the sight of him on her back they increased their speed yet again. They were oblivious to their surroundings, unaware of the large dragons closing in on them. They were shooting flames at her, trying to get Steve. Just as they were almost upon her, she darted up at supersonic speed. Too late they saw their mistake. From all about them flames shot out, and many fell in the first barrage. Dragons darted in and out, flaming and burning. These ragged and tattered beasts were falling like flies, clearly out matched. Their flames could barely reach the dragons or their riders, and they were destroyed before they knew what hit them. The entire battle took less than thirty minutes.

After making sure that there were no surprises left in the air, Jake dispatched Rah to hunt down a scout that he knew would be there to observe and report back. Rah spotted her trying to hide behind a cloud. When she realized that Rah was on to her, she tried desperately to fly away. There was no contest; Rah dove on her claws extended and ripped her in two, throwing the halves into the air and flaming then to the ground. He made sure there was nothing but ash left. Rah reported to Jake that she was gone. He scanned the skies and advised it was safe for the moment. Sally was beaming with excitement over the chase and flaming.

Rah you are the best! She praised her mighty friend.

Of course I am! Rah chuckled, *am I not a dragon of light?*

Back at the camp, they carefully began to land two at a time on the mesa. Each rider and dragon checked themselves for any signs of injury. In the heat of battle, with adrenalin flowing, it is sometimes possible not to feel a hit. Jake was the last to land. He called the Riders and Dragons to the Riders Hall for a debriefing. They were all panting, sweating profusely.

“That was one hell of a fight!” Shouted Steve, voicing their feelings. *“They were no match for us! Jake, you have trained us well, I bow to you.”* Steve and the Riders behind him all bowed low to Jake.

Jake roared a loud ‘approval’ for his dragons and their riders.
I am pleased in all of you; you have done well this day. This was but a small battle in a very large war. Now, we must see to the people below. Collin and Jeff, please stay, we have much to go over.

The rest of the riders left the cave and started below. Michael rushed to the hatching grounds with Sally at his side. As he came up the side of the mountain, Tabs was lying across the path, his body was covered in dried blood from several open wounds. He whined as he saw Michael and wagged his broken tail. He was hurt badly, but he would survive his wounds. Michael found Ash lying nearby. He bent over his beloved friend and tears flowed freely. Oreo came forward and rubbed against him and he tried to push her away; it was then that Michael realized what these brave companions had done this day. Oreo was covered in blood, matted to her fur. She meowed pitifully at him and howled at Sally. Michael looked at Tabs and Ash, realization dawning on him as he saw they too were matted with blood. It was Queenie, thru Jake, who began to tell Michael what had occurred.

Be well pleased in your friends Michael. They fought a mighty mutant bear that had been sent to destroy my eggs. I was in the throes of delivery and could not help them. They, and they alone destroyed that monster. They saved my life and the lives of my future children. I shall ever be in their debt for the sacrifice they made this day. Ash gave his life so that my children may live. The fur ball, Oreo, went into a rage and killed the beast after her friends fell. She then descended and dispatched many more. She was very angry with them for what they had done to her friends. She saved those below. Your friend gave his life to protect me, Michael. They all deserve a mighty salute, and shall receive one.

Kate and Daniel descended the mountain quickly and went to the Hall. The camp was a mess; everything was strewn about and broken. They saw a large pile of fur and a lot of blood near the brush and much more at the cave opening.

“Oh Daniel, if anything happened to Sam, I just couldn’t...” Kate leaned against Daniel for support.

“Easy girl, you can do this. Come on, we’ll go see for ourselves.” He took her hand and they headed towards the Hall.

They called out, “Sam! Sam, are you all right?” There was no answer at first, and then they heard him.

“Daniel, Kate, we’re ok, no one was hurt. Is it safe to come out?” Daniel could hear the fear in his voice.

“Yes Sam, it’s safe,” Daniel assured him.

As the people emerged, they could see that there had been a terrible battle. Shell casings were strewn all about the entrance to the Hall. Sam ran over to Daniel and Kate.

“You are all a sight for sore eyes. It was touch and go for a while there, I tell you!” He was still shaking from the battle. “They must have rounded up all the mutant bears in the valley. They kept coming at us Daniel; I thought we were going to run out of ammo. Then that cat, that damned, beautiful cat came out of nowhere. God almighty Daniel, you wouldn’t believe what that cat did. She took on six of those things. Ripped them to shreds, there was fur flying everywhere. She was howling something awful; it tore right thru us. Hope to never see or hear anything like it again.”

Daniel looked at Kate, mystified at this news. “Are you sure it was Oreo?”

“Oh yes, it was that cat, only more!” Sam and several of the men agreed on that point. “Daniel, I tell you she was like a saber-toothed tiger, all fangs and claws.”

“It was her Daniel.” Michael and Sally had descended. “Ash is dead Kate, he died protecting the Queen.” There were tears in his eyes and Kate could see he was deeply saddened by the death of his friend.

“Oh Michael, I am so sorry,” she gently grabbed his arm and squeezed it.

“Queenie told me what happened. Oreo and the ‘twins’ kept a huge mutant bear from entering the hatching grounds. There was a hell of a battle up there. First Tabs fell wounded, and they continued the fight. But when Ash fell dying she said that Oreo went wild, she tore the head off the thing. She tried to help Ash, but he died. The Queen said she gave her strength and she ran off down the mountain like a fiend. She killed one more mutant bear on its way up; then she came below here and destroyed the rest of them. We owe her a great debt.”

Lady Jennie let out a loud mournful roar from above and the other dragons followed. *Ash was my friend; they were both brave companions. I am deeply saddened at his death, my Michael.*

Thru Jake the Queen spoke now. *As tribute to his act of self-sacrifice, I invoke right of Queen to name the first of my children to hatch. It shall be ASH!*

There was a mighty roar from all the dragons, and the earth shook. *He will be remembered!* They roared as one.

Michael was overcome with emotion at this honor to his brave friend. He stood there unashamed as tears streamed down his face.

Up above Jake kept pace with the goings on. *My beautiful Queen; it is so noble of you to name the first dragon after our brave friend. He deserves the honor you give him. Lady Jennie, how fair you at this terrible sad news; you were closest to them both.*

My heart goes out to Michael; his heart is greatly saddened by the death of his friend. I shall miss Ash also, as he was always by my side. The fur ball now guards the Queen alone. Fearsome tho she is; we must find her a new companion.

Jake, Queenie called to him in a soothing voice, *our hatching grounds now hold twenty eggs. They are shall be ready soon my love for your next step. Is it not time to bring the young ones here?*

Be patient my lovely, he purred to her, there is still much to attend to first.

Turning his attention to Jeff, he continued; *now where were we? Ah yes, Master Jeffrey, we will need some strategic plans for the future. They will not fall for same trick again. Work on it for the next several days and let me know what you come up with.*

Jake now called below to Daniel. *Daniel, tomorrow morning I need you and Lady Kate, along with Steve and Lady Ashley to come to the Riders Hall. In the meantime, see that the riders get some rest. They have earned it this night.*

Daniel and the other riders helped get the camp back in order. Sam cooked up a huge meal for everyone, and after all had eaten Daniel insisted that everyone get some rest. He sent them all home. He told Steve about the meeting in the morning with Jake. Then he and Kate went to their own cave and tried to rest themselves

Kate was very upset for Michael. Loosing Ash was something she had not prepared herself for, and it was heavy on her heart. She sought the comfort of Daniels arms, and she cried and mourned for that 'silly' dog. Daniel felt sorry for Michael also as he had really liked both dogs. Exhaustion soon overtook them both and they fell asleep curled up next to each other.

Above, Jake sent healing to all the people in their dreams. The loss of Ash seemed to affect everyone in the camp.

In his cave with Miss Susan asleep by his side, Jeffery couldn't sleep. He had been very upset over what had happened, he could see and feel the pain that they all felt over the death of Ash. His mind was racing with all kinds of thoughts.

Ash was only a dog, yes, but his death had affected everyone.

His thoughts began to come together cohesively; things began to get clearer; gradually he began to realize a great truth.

We are all God's creatures. Ash had selflessly given his life to protect what he perceived to be most important. All life is valuable.

Jeffery began to take this line of thought further. After a time he became aware, and with crystal clarity his thoughts fell into place. Suddenly he grew very excited and wanted to speak to Jake. Quietly, so as not to disturb Miss Susan, he left his quarters and went above to speak to Jake.

As he stepped out on to the mesa, the sun rising over the mountaintops illuminated it. Jeffery saw before him a sight that no man had ever seen. He was humbled, and his heart was filled as silent tears ran down his face. There before him was Jake, in all his awesome majesty, kneeling as it were, head bent, his body perfectly outlined by the rays of the rising sun. He knew instinctively that he was praying! This huge mighty dragon was humbling himself before the Almighty, giving the Creator of us all His due. Jeffery felt that he had intruded on a very private spiritual thing and he quietly turned to leave.

You do not have to leave Master Jeffery. Jake had heard him come out onto the mesa. What troubles your heart and mind so?

Not troubled Jake, just in awe of something far greater than I ever imagined. I see now Jake.

Tears were streaming down his face as he bowed before Jake.

My friend...no, rise. Jake could see and feel his raw emotions.

Jeff brought himself under control and continued, *I see Jake, and I understand. It is most overwhelming to this poor arrogant man. Jeffery stepped forward and placed his hand on Jake's neck; your wisdom, my friend, your guidance, and your great capacity for patience with us all... it truly humbles me. I beg your forgiveness for having ever doubted you in my heart.*

A strong bond was formed that night between the two of them. Jeffery told Jake about his thoughts, and the design and purpose he thought was in place. Jake chuckled and told him that he was correct, but this was information that was best not shared. Man must always choose for himself. Jeffery understood all too clearly. From then on, there was a deep connection between Jake and Jeffery, a connection that filled Jeffery's heart with hope for the future of mankind.

Far away in the forests of a Michigan town, the students and teachers in the Osborne School for the Gifted were all given very special dreams. They were being prepared for the move to their new home. When they awoke, they all knew without a doubt that they would be sent for within days. They had all seen it in their dreams. Riders would appear from the west.

The next morning as the sun was rising; Daniel and Kate were in the Mess Hall drinking coffee. Daniel scanned the Hall as the people were finishing breakfast and getting ready for the days chores. As he checked over everyone, he spied the strange couple, Jackson and Sarah, as they prepared to leave the Hall. They were a very strange pair; hard workers, but never got chummy with anyone. They always kept to themselves. He mentioned this to Kate.

“I’m sure that there’s a story to be told there,” he said sardonically,” and he was also sure in time that he would hear it.

“Daniel! You of all people shouldn’t make a crack like that,” Kate said defensively. “That woman went thru hell at the hands of the marauders. If it wasn’t for Jackson, she would be dead.”

Just then Steve entered the Hall with Lady Ashley. Daniel was glad as he didn’t want to get into an argument with Kate over this. They greeted each other cheerfully and all ate breakfast together.

“I wonder what Jake has up his sleeve this time,” pondered Steve.

“I’m pretty sure I have an idea what it’s about.” Daniel had a grin on his face, “remember now, Queenie has laid her eggs, all twenty of them!”

Steve stared at Daniel questioningly.

“Well, where are the riders going to come from?” Daniel looked at them, “he has to have something on the back burner. Come on, Jake is always prepared.”

They finished eating and headed to the top of the mountain. Once there, Steve and Lady Ashley called their dragons and asked a ride for their friends. They then flew to the large Riders Hall. As they entered the Hall they could see that Jake was already conspiring with Jeffrey and Jerry. Jake called them over.

Steve, Daniel, I hope that you are well rested, good to see all of you. You all did very well yesterday. Lady Ashley, you were very impressive in battle. You took out those two dragons that attacked you quickly and efficiently. Well done little one! Ashley was beaming at such praise from Jake.

Steve, I need of your special talents. I want you to make a new cave on the far mountain. It must be large enough to accommodate about 22 people. It will be temporary till they separate into mating couples. Do you think you might be able to do that for me today?

I knew it! You’ve had something going all along, haven’t you Jake. Daniel was sure of it.

You know me well Daniel. There is a school a few hours flight from here. I have been preparing them for some time. Now it is time for us to go and get them. They are to be our new riders. The task of training them is for you, Daniel and Steve, to perform. Now, how do we pick up 22 people and bring them here with all their possessions day after tomorrow.

Steve spoke up. *That's easy; take the trailer we used to transport Daniel to the town. It should hold them. I'll have the cave ready by tonight. Just start it in the area you want, and Jerry and I will finish it.*

Preparations were made, and the trailer was brought to the mountaintop. Once there, Jerry cut air holes around the top, and they placed seats in it like a bus. Jerry welded them to the base of the trailer. Lady Olivia flew Jerry over to Steve on the other side of the mountain, and together they blew out a rather large cave for the new riders. Then they got Kate and Daniel and flew to the town and loaded up on cots and beds, and all the sheets, blankets, pillows, rugs, and other stuff they thought that the students might need. They moved all the furniture and beds into the cave, and Daniel and Jerry and Steve put the beds together. Kate laid the rugs, and created a small private area for their teachers. By the end of the day, everyone was very tired.

Early the next morning at breakfast, Kate pulled Sam aside and told him they were bringing the students back with them the next day. If he required any extra food now was the time to make a run to the warehouse. He decided to make a feast for them, even to bake some cakes. He took the trailer on a trial run to load up, and really appreciated the seats. He said that they worked real well. He laid in a 6 case supply of sodas for the kids, and also quite a bit of junk food. He and Lucy got busy making up quite a menu for the next day. Jake said that they would be back around dinnertime.

The finishing touches were put on the cave, and after checking everything, Kate pronounced it finished. They had brought in a couple of leather couches, and created a sitting area for them. She had also insisted on a screen divider for the two teachers. They had to have some privacy. She knew that once their eggs hatched, they would be moving to their own caves with their mates.

At the Osborne School, new dreams told them that they would be coming for them the next day. Excited at the prospect of leaving, they prepared quickly. One of their fellow students was placed in the tower of the school to alert them when the riders were sighted. They then went about the school retrieving all their possessions and packing their bags. They went to the field behind the school where their garden was, and took the tomatoes, and green beans, and corn that was ready and they put it all in a large basket. They went to the apple orchard and filled four large baskets with the apples that were ready. They went around turning off the gas, and closing up the school. All of their things were brought to the auditorium and lined up. The next morning they decided to gather in the soccer field behind the school. They would sleep this night in the auditorium and wait for the coming day.

The next morning Daniel, Kate, Steve, and Lady Ashley all met for breakfast in the great hall. They quickly ate and went up the mountain and reported to Jake. There was excitement in the air. Jake told them that Daowyn and Lady Ashley were instructed to ride in the heights to cover their backs. Steve, riding Lady Elzbeth, took off first and scouted the skies. Kate mounted Jake with Daniel right behind her.

*All clear in the skies ahead Jake, Lady Elzbeth informed them.
Nothing on wing behind you, Daowyn reported.*

Jake took to the sky and circled in a wide arc, he then swooped down and picked up the trailer. Lady Elzbeth flew scout position in front and Jake followed her. They flew at a fast pace, Jake wanting to complete this flight quickly and get the future riders to safety. At Daniel's urging, Jake explained where they were going.

Several years ago I became aware of a certain school hidden deep in the woods of one of your northern states. It was a school for very special children; Osborne School for the Gifted. I knew we would need riders in the future. And these were not ordinary students; each was superior in different fields of the sciences. Their brains held the capacity for forward thinking, acceptance of the extra-ordinary. So I sent them dreams, and allowed them to decide for themselves if they wanted to do this thing. I then contacted their oldest fellow student, Jason, and asked directly. The answer was a resounding 'yes'.

Jake's voice now took on a softer tone.

The two teachers that remained with the students have become surrogate parents to them. They love them all as if they were their real parents. They gave them great leeway in their lessons and encouraged them in developing their telepathic abilities. In doing so, several of the students developed ahead of the others. They were able to see into the hearts of these two teachers, and touch the love they found there with their minds. They relayed what they saw and felt to their fellow students and a strong bond developed. The students are very attached to them

By mid-afternoon Daniel could see the mountain range Jake was heading towards. Barely an hour later, they crested a large mountain and Jake started to descend. Daniel could make out the tops of the school spires. As they glided over he could see that some were assembled on the soccer field, and others were running across the field to join them. They had been waiting for them to arrive!

The students watched in open-mouthed wonder as Jake and the other dragons came closer. They were quite amazed at Jake's size. They saw the trailer that Jake was carrying, and immediately knew that it was for them. Jake placed the trailer on the field, circled again, and then came in for a landing taking full advantage of the reflection of the sun to show off his great majesty. Wings fully extended he landed stretched to his full height; carefully and slowly folded his wings, and turned his massive head and stared at the group of students standing in dumb awe at the sight of him.

Kate and Daniel dismounted; standing there for a moment to size up the situation. They needn't have bothered. Slowly at first, the students came out of their stupor and began to walk over to them, one by one. From the door of the building closest to them two adults came running out. They stopped short when they saw Jake, and then Lady Elzbeth landed and Steve dismounted. The students weren't bothered at all. The smallest came right up to Daniel and Kate attacking them with a barrage of questions.

"Are you Daniel?"

"You must be Kate?"

"That's got to be Jake then, right?"

"Just how big is he?"

“Who is that landing next to him?”

“Kids! Kids!” Daniel was holding up his hands and smiling at them, “hold on, jeez give me a break here! One at a time, I’m only human!” Kate was chuckling at his reaction. “Answers are as follows; yes, yes, yes, very big, and Steve riding Lady Elzbeth.”

While all this was going on, one lone student fearlessly approached Jake. Jason looked up at the huge dragon before him and thought to himself; *My God you’re so big, much bigger than the dreams showed. You have to be Jake!*

***Yes Jason, I am.* Jake answered him lowering his massive head.**

Jason backed up quickly, slipped and fell on his butt, all the while starring up at Jake.

Yes! I knew it was real. And you’re not the only one!* He turned to his fellow students, *Hey guys...oops!

“Hey guys,” he shouted loudly. They all looked towards Jason, mouths agape.

“It’s him,” he was pointing at Jake, whose massive head was right behind him; “it’s Jake...he’s real!”

There was a loud shout from 19 boys and girls.

“YEA!”

They ran over to Jason and Jake - no fear in their eyes, just awe. A loud shout from Daniel stopped them in their tracks.

“Stop! Hold up a second, guys.” He walked over to them as they turned to face him. “Before you go any further there is some dragon etiquette that we must get out of the way. Do you give permission of your own free will for Jake to speak with you in your minds? If you agree, turn and face Jake and answer in your mind with a yes.”

They have agreed Daniel.* Jake replied immediately in a strong fatherly tone. *Calm yourselves my young warriors. We have come to take you to your new home where you will be safe from harm. The Insane Ones would do you great harm if they could find you.

It was Jason who spoke first. *But Jake, we are very safe here. In all our years here, there has never been a repeat of that first attack. John and Alex have taken very good care of us. They taught us how to survive, how to grow our own food. We have done here what no one would have thought possible of children.*

Yes, Jason, you have done very well.* Jake answered him, *but the Insane Ones will come here to try and stop you from becoming riders. They do not want us bringing you to our camp. We cannot wait another day.

My Liege, it was Daowyn warning them, we are about to have company! Two of them are on their way to the field right now. I believe they are only scouts.

All of you quickly go into the school, right now. Run!* Jake urged the terrified students. *We are about to have some unwanted guests.

The children and their teachers took off at a dead run and were inside in less than a minute. The students pressed their noses to the window pane watching what was going on outside. Daniel ran and mounted Jake, as did Kate. They took off quickly with Steve and Lady Elzbeth in the lead. Then they shot straight up in the air and were out of sight.

“Did you see how fast they rose to the sky?” Jason asked no one in particular. “Look!” He pointed towards the west.

A few minutes later they saw two black shapes heading their way. Much smaller than the dragons they were just talking to, and not as healthy looking either. There was a blur as two dragons streaked by them flaming as they passed. The two dragons fell from the skies and Daowyn dove and flamed them all the way to the ground. The children watched him in fascination.

Jake glided down and landed on the field again; the students came running out of the school. Jake turned to Jason, *So Jason, how safe do you feel now?*

What do you want us to do Jake? Jason asked with wide eyes, as he stared at Lady Elzbeth and Steve.

Load all of your things on to the trailer. Take everything you want with you; you will not be returning to this place.

Jason relayed what they were to do. The students grabbed their things and started to drag everything over to the trailer. Steve came over to help and the boys gathered about him asking all sorts of questions. ‘What did it feel like to fly so fast; what was his dragon’s name; how did his dragon flame and dive at the same time’; it went on and on. Steve laughed loudly at their enthusiasm. Jason sent four boys to go and bring the baskets of apples and vegetables out to the trailer.

John and Alexandria slowly came over and introduced themselves to Daniel and Kate. Daniel asked and then took them to meet Jake. They were a little apprehensive, but there was nothing they wouldn’t do for their charges, so they followed him. There was pure awe in their eyes as they approached him. Daniel received their permission for Jake to speak to them by explaining why their permission was needed.

You have both done very well with these young warriors. Jake praised them. You have allowed their exceptional minds to grow at an accelerated pace. You should be very proud of your accomplishment.

John spoke up first. *Jake, whew, I’m just a bit nervous. We, Alex and I, were never sure if all this was real, but the kids believed it, and we didn’t want to deny what we didn’t know for certain. And then we began to have the dreams also.*

Alex then joined the conversation; *Yes, and we spoke of them for some time, then we came to realize that all things had changed in the world as we knew it. Thru the children we came to believe that there was a new order being created. No harm had ever come to any of us from the knowledge that was imparted in the dreams. We all began to feel that we were being prepared for something.*

As they stood there speaking with Jake, John protectively put his arm around Alex. The gesture did not go unnoticed by Daniel. It was Kate who finally broke the ice.

You two love each other. Over the years you have both looked to each other for strength in caring and teaching these children. She smiled at them with understanding. We are not taking them away from you, Alex. You’re both going to come and be a part of this new world we are trying to create. The children wouldn’t leave without you anyway.

Jason came over to them, “we have a little problem. Some of us have pets and we don’t want to leave them here. They would be killed by predators sooner or later. We want to take with us, can we?”

“Pets?” Daniel asked. “What kind of pets are we talking about?”

Jason turned to Daniel, “well, we have 2 dogs, a falcon, and two cats.”

Daniel grinned, “2 dogs you say.” He turned to Kate and raised his eyebrow.

Bring them. It was Jake who made the decision.

One of the boys, much smaller than the others, walked to the edge of the field and called out loudly, “Brutus, Cesar, come here boys.” Two large huskies came out of the woods at a dead run and stopped in front of him.

“Nice looking huskies, what’s your name young man?” Daniel asked.

“Andrew sir,” he was looking at Daniel with awe, “I’ve dreamed of you.”

“I’m sure you have.” Daniel said smiling. “Well, load up your friends we need to get moving.”

Andrew called the dogs and they all headed towards the trailer. He threw in his bags and the dogs jumped up. They began sniffing everything in the trailer.

A girl of about fifteen or so came up to Kate, “I can bring my falcon?” Kate smiled and nodded. She stepped away a few paces and held her arm out and whistled a shrill high warble. A beautiful brownish red colored falcon sailed out of the nearby woods and landed on her outstretched arm, “easy Lancelot,” it squawked once and settled itself.

“Lancelot! What a good name for such a beautiful bird.” Kate said as she stroked his chest gently with her finger.

“My name is Emily,” she was blushing, “and I promise, he won’t be any problem.”

Emily, you don’t have to worry about the animals. Jake informed her. *Ours have always gotten along with us. In fact, three of them saved the life of my Queen and her eggs. But that tale is for after we return home.*

Emily stood there staring at Jake. She forgot for a moment and began thinking, *I just can’t get over how big and how beautiful you are.*

Thank you Emily, now return to the trailer. We must leave quickly. Jake turned his large head, Daniel we must be off, is there a problem?

Yes, a very small one Jake, they are trying to find the cats. Daniel explained further, *they split after the flaming, and the kids can’t find them.*

Tell the children to return. Jake ordered. *I will call them; what are their names?*

“Susie, Darla, please come here.” Susie and Darla were twins, lovely freckle-faced redheads. Daniel was waving them over. “What are the cat’s names?”

“Thor and Dottie,” they said in unison.

Jake raised himself to his full height and spread his wings and then turned to Emily’s direction. He purred for a moment, and Lancelot took off and flew to Jake and landed on his right wing. Emily couldn’t believe what she was seeing. Lancelot would never land on anyone but her. Purring loudly Jake called the cats to him.

Thor, Dottie, your mistresses have need of your presence. Come immediately.

From behind the school building two red striped tabby cats bounded across the field to Jake. They stopped at his feet. *Go to your mistresses, we are going to your new home.*

Both cats ran to the girls who were staring at Jake open mouthed.

Daniel broke this scene, "All right everyone, lets get settled; we have to leave now. You will be just fine inside. We use this for transporting the camp folk whenever we go shopping."

"Shopping!" several girls shouted.

"Where do you go?"

"Is there a Mall where we are going?"

"Hold your questions till we arrive my inquisitive ones. There will be plenty of air coming in thru the vents, but wear your coats, it gets cold up above." Daniel smiled his best smile of reassurance, and shut the doors of the trailer.

Inside the trailer conversations broke out. "All right you guys, what do you think?" Jason asked them all.

"Oh it's them all right Jason," Andrew assured them. "I'm very excited."

There was a sudden lurch, and they felt themselves being lifted. Jake took to the air and headed west. It would be an easy flight back. Daowyn went to the heights and flew just ahead of them keeping a careful watch. *I see no more of them Jake, we are safe to travel home.*

Inside the trailer the students were busy comparing notes and feelings about what they just experienced. They all agreed that they felt no negativity. The people seemed to have their best interests at heart. And they were all very good looking.

"Especially that Daniel, he's a fox!" Andrea, a sixteen year old gushed, "and did you see the hair on Kate and Lady Ashley, man they are too much!"

Andrew spoke up, "Did you see how fast that Daowyn was? He fired that black dragon with lightening speed. It was so amazing to watch."

"I agree Andy," Emily joined in, "it was like watching ballet, he was so graceful."

"Can we get back to reality," Jason said. "If the dreams are correct, we are about to enter a whole new world. We are going to be like them, dragon riders!"

The trip took 3 hours. They felt their speed slowing, and then there was a slight bump as the trailer was placed on the landing. A few minutes later the doors were opened, and they got a look at their new home in the fading light of sunset. As they jumped down, they could see other dragons in the air above them. Their faces were all smiles as they watched them land one at a time to let their riders dismount. They stared at six of the most beautiful people they had ever seen.

Daniel walked over to them and a dazzling young man stepped forward to meet him halfway.

"Are these our future riders Daniel?" Michael asked smiling, as he looked them all over; and the girls all blushed at the sight of him.

“Yes they are and quite a handful.” Daniel put his hand on the young mans shoulder and turned to them, “My young friends, I’d like to introduce you to Michael, rider of Lady Jennie,” Daniel indicated the large chocolate dragon on the mesa.

Michael bowed to them all. Even though they had all just seen him land and dismount, they marveled at the shear size of Lady Jennie.

Just then the two huskies jumped out of the trailer and went to Andrew’s side. Daniel felt Michael stiffen slightly. The Dragons all keened a high pitch warble. The dogs turned their heads and appeared to be listening. They pranced straight over to Michael and sat and looked up at him. Michael knelt down and patted the head of each one.

“Who is the master of these two,” he asked rather forcefully. Sally came to his side, concern on her face.

“They’re my friends,” said a slight boy of fifteen, “I’m Andrew. This is Brutus, and this is Cesar, they’re Alaskan Huskies.”

“You are very lucky, they are beautiful dogs.” Michael stared at Andrew for a few seconds, a pained look quickly passed over his face, “never take their friendship or their loyalty for granted.”

Andrew could see that he was upset, but now was not the time to ask why. “Yes sir!”

Daniel broke the spell, “Gather up your things young ones, the riders will help you. It gets mighty cold up here when the sun goes down, so let’s hurry up.”

The large group was led down the mountainside to the Riders Hall. Their bags and possessions were lined up against the wall, and they were all beckoned to the center. There was a huge boulder in the center and it appeared to have been sheared in half; it was used as a great table.

After everyone was in the Hall, Daniel stepped forward and began speaking, “We welcome you all here to Dragons Hill. We here are a small but growing force whose purpose is to put an end to the horror that has engulfed our world.” As he spoke, the Riders and their Dragons came into the huge hall. They stood by their dragons and listened to Daniel. The students all stared in amazement at the size of the beasts filling the Hall.

“You have all been chosen, just as we were, to be a part of that force.” Daniel walked around them as he spoke. “Let me introduce you to our Riders and their Dragons,” he said with a wave of his arm towards the riders and dragons behind him. As he called out their names, each Rider stepped before his or her Dragon. The students listened intently to his every word.

“You have already met Kate, rider of Jake, First of the Ancients. I am Daniel, rider of Queenie, consort to Jake.

“Over here is Michael, whom you already met, rider of Lady Jennie, mate to Rah.” Michael bowed and winked at the girls; several giggled.

“This is Lady Sally, rider of Rah, First Wing to Jake. She is also Michael’s mate.” There were a lot of ‘ohs and ahs’ at the sight of Rah. He was pleased that his presence impressed them so. He nodded his massive head to them.

“Over here we have Steve, rider of Lady Elzbeth, mate to Daowyn. Steve is our demolitions expert.” Steve waved to them and Lady Elzbeth nodded.

“Next is Lady Ashley, mate to Steve, rider of Daowyn. You all witnessed today what he is capable of doing.” Lady Ashley smiled at them, and Daowyn bent his head in a nod of acknowledgement.

“Over here we have Jerry, rider of Lady Olivia, mate to Rhontin. Jerry is our engineer. “This is Lady Beth, mate to Jerry, rider of Rhontin.” He walked over to the other side of the large table.

“This is Collin, rider of Lady Maya, mate to Jared. He has the sight, so don’t ever lie to him, he’ll call you on it.” Collin waved at them.

“Next to him is Lady Becky, mate to Collin, and rider of Jared the Blue.” Becky waved, and Jared nodded.

He went to the center, “and this is Master Jeffery, our advisor, and strategist. He has a great deal of knowledge at his disposal. So if you have need of any information at all, speak to him.”

“Don’t try to remember all this; it will come to you when you need it. Down below is our main camp, and the people we protect. We will be going there shortly.”

There was much whispering among the students. Each was staring intently at the dragons and their riders.

Just then the two tabby cats jumped up on the table and looked all around. The dragons all started purring as one. The cats seemed to be pleased; there was no fear of the mighty beasts that surrounded them. All the students looked on in amazement. As if on cue, Oreo pranced into the Hall and sauntered up to the table. Purring loudly she nuzzled the two cats almost knocking them over. She then threw herself down and engaged in 'kitten play'.

"What is that? That's not really a cat, is it? Look at the size of the thing!" The kids were unabashed and very vocal. The Riders all laughed at their response to Oreo.

It was Sally who stepped forward and spoke, "that is my cat, Oreo. She's still just a kitten. She's an enhanced kitten, but still a kitten. She will be happy to have some new friends." There was laughter all around the Hall.

Daniel stepped forward, "You must have a lot of questions, and we will answer them all tomorrow. For now, let us descend to the Great Hall and have some dinner. Come and follow." Kate came to his side and she beckoned Alex and John to the front of the line with them. They made quite a sight as they all began the descent.

They came out of the last opening and started down the pathway and they all got their first view of the camp. Many people were entering a huge cave. They followed and went inside and down the long passageway. They were stunned at the size of the cave as they entered the main chamber.

Sam had arranged a small feast and a cheery welcome for them. As they came into the cave there was a mighty shout "Welcome to Dragons Hill!" He stepped forward and announced to them all, "We welcome you to your new home. I'm Sam, and this is Lucy, my wife. We have prepared a feast in your honor. Come, please, sit yourselves down."

Two long tables were placed together and the children all found seats. They were wide eyed and smiling, and looking all about. Several large platters of food were placed on the table and drinks were brought forward.

"Look, they have cokes!" It was Andrew who spoke first. "Look at this food, chicken, and steaks, mashed potatoes, corn on the cob! Hot damn, we must be in heaven!"

"Andrew," it was Alex who admonished him, "watch your language."

"Hell Alex," John chimed in, "the kid is right, this must be heaven."

"John, we are not going to forget our manners. You all know what to do," she admonished them.

They all rose as one, took each other's hand, and began to recite a prayer. "We thank you Lord for our lives. Thank you for this bounty you have set before us. Thank you for the protection you have sent us. May we be deserving of your gifts."

Daniel and Kate looked at each other. They had been trained well by John and Alex. There were shouts of "Hear, hear" from the people in the Hall.

They all quickly sat and began stuffing their faces. Their food had been limited, and so their portions had been small. To see a feast like this set before them was more than they could bear. They ate to

their full, some going back for seconds; they drank gallons of sweet tea, and biscuits with honey disappeared as soon as they were brought to the table.

Alex leaned over and spoke to Kate, “we have not had such good food in a very long time. I am most grateful that you do us honor in this way.”

“Alex, this is how we eat all the time. We found a warehouse center and it is powered by solar energy. We have all the food we could possibly want. And there is also a clothing center; you all look like you could use new clothing. We can go to town for new clothes in a day or two; we are very excited that you are all here at last.” She patted her hand, reassuring her.

“I am so overwhelmed, Kate. There is something here, so positive, you can almost touch it. I can see that you care deeply for the other,” she gestured around the table.

“It’s not a secret Alex, we love each other, and respect each other; we are all family. Jake showed us how easy it is when you care and respect your fellow man. Everyone who comes here is engulfed by it. We live in true peace and harmony. No man betters himself over another. We all help each other, and in doing that, we all grow spiritually. Jake has taught us just by example. We see him and the other dragons and how they behave towards each other. We will explain more tomorrow at the meeting.”

“Jake was able to do all this?” She shook her head, “I do admit that he is most impressive. But to allow him to run your lives...”

“Oh no, you have it all wrong,” Kate quickly interjected. “Think about your children, how did you manage to turn out such intelligent and intuitive ones? You taught them, and allowed them to make their own choices, right? You and John set an example for them to follow. It’s the same thing. Jake showed us what we could do, and let us decide for our selves. I had shut myself off to the possibility of finding love and happiness. Jake showed me that it was possible, and Daniel did the rest. Each of us found our soul mate, and we are indeed very happy.” Just then Daniel leaned over and whispered something to her and kissed her on the cheek.

Alex smiled, “He is very attentive. And I notice that all of you are quite beautiful, you seem to glow. Is it the food or something? I have never seen such lovely women and such handsome men. What ever it is, it agrees with you all.”

“It comes from the Dragons. We’ll explain tomorrow at the meeting above. Do you love John?” she asked very nonchalantly.

“Yes, yes I do. Over the years I have come to love him very much. And I believe he feels the same for me.” She answered a little defensively.

“Well, the longer you are here, you and he will find that your love will grow to something more. You will develop a higher level of understanding, a more profound feeling towards each other. It is a very spiritual, physical thing. It happens quite unexpectedly, one day you will look at each other, and you will simply know.”

“Oh, this is just too much to take in at one time.” Alex was really overwhelmed by everything going on, “I do believe that the children are in heaven. Their dreams have been vindicated.”

Alex was looking at all of them as a mother looks with pride on her children. Loud noises and protests were coming from the table where the children were seated. Some of the riders had sat down amid them, and they were being hammered by questions. They were so happy, she was very glad that they

were adjusting so well. She and John had done the right thing in staying and caring for them. Whatever the future holds, she knew it would be good for them. And that was her only concern. She and John had been careful over the years to teach them the right things, to give them a good foundation to live by. Seeing them now like this, she was pleased.

The Hall suddenly got very quiet as a large yellow Lab came limping into the Hall. There were loud shouts of "Well done! Go Tabs!" The children all stared at this huge animal with bandages wrapped about his legs and torso. It took him a bit longer than usual, but he went straight to Michael. Michael bent over and hugged him and gently patted his massive head lovingly; he fed him a small amount of meat and placed a bowl of water before him. Andrew stared at the large dog as if in a trance. He got up and went over to him, kneeling down he patted Tabs head.

"You are the biggest Lab I've ever seen. I have two friends who will like you very much. I hope you get well soon." He stared into the big dogs eyes and there was an immediate connection between them. Suddenly tears streamed down Andrews cheeks. He blurted out, "Oh, I'm so sorry." Tabs gave him a big lick and almost knocked him over.

Lady Jennie told Michael; *the little one has a gift, My Michael. He feels the sorrow in Tabs heart.* Michael stared at Andrew with new eyes.

After another hour Daniel stood up, "May I have your attention please? You have all had a pretty big day; now is the time to rest. If you will all follow us, we will get you squared away in a temporary shelter we have prepared for you. Your things have been taken there already. Oh, and your animals have been fed and are waiting for you." There were loud protests but in the end they all got up and followed Daniel and Kate.

They led them up the side of the other mountain and into a huge cave. There were cots lined up in two rows, and their animals were waiting for them. "Get a good nights rest and we will meet for breakfast in the morning. You can find your way down to the Hall I am sure. The Dragons fly watch during the night, so you will all be safe here."

Kate went to Alexandria and John and wished them a good night. Then she and Daniel left them and went down the mountain and decided to turn in early themselves.

John and Alex watched Kate and Daniel leave and then turned to face their charges. "Well, you guys have certainly had a big day. All your conjecture and guesses were laid out right there for you to see. Now begins a new future for us all. I am proud of all of you." He was beaming with pride as a father would.

Andrew spoke up, "I wonder what happened to Michael's dog. Maybe I'll ask and find out tomorrow."

Susie and Darla spoke together, "and what's with that cat?"

"I think that we need to get some rest," Jason said. "We are here, and we all know now that we are to be Dragon Riders, like them. Let's wait till tomorrow and see what happens at the meeting."

Alex chimed in, "I agree. Everybody pick a cot and go to sleep."

Up above, in their cave Kate was asking, "What do you think Daniel?"

“I think we have a good batch of riders. But tomorrow will tell for sure Kate. After we tell them what it all entails. I don’t think John and Alex are going to go for them suddenly being all grown up after their eggs hatch.”

He was undressing, and he stopped to watch her. She had undone the braid he had made for her that morning, and was brushing her hair out in long strokes. He still hadn’t gotten used to seeing her undress and do the little things like this. The sight of her sometimes took his breath away. He came up behind her and slipped his arms around her waist. He gently kissed her on the neck. She responded with a deep husky “Daniel,” and she turned and faced him. He took her in his arms and kissed her softly at first, and then more passionately.

“Have I told you today that I love you woman?” He lifted her in his arms and laid her on their bed, and began unbuttoning her shirt while caressing her neck.

“You are impossible! Oh Daniel ...stop! ...Daniel, ...oh yes!”

They spent the better part of the next hour making love, and pleasuring each other. As they lay there afterwards, Daniel contemplated how his life had changed. *This is what it is all about, caring and loving someone, being loved in return; watching out for each other, helping your fellow man, trying to make a difference.* He fell asleep happy that he had followed his dreams and found this joy.

High above, Jake purred and keened. *Our future sleeps below; we will be ready.*

Several of the young students woke early and went exploring about the camp, curious about their new home. They met Sam on his way to prepare breakfast. Firing off questions as they went they followed him into the cave and Sam put them all to work. By the time Daniel and Kate showed up he had enough of them. He shoed them out and told them to find the rest of their friends. They joined up with them and compared notes. No one had found out anything.

After eating a hearty breakfast, Daniel called them all together and they headed for Riders Hall. They entered the Hall and found Jeffery was already there with Jake. They lined up around the big table. Jeffery turned around and began addressing them.

“Welcome to Dragons Hill young ones! You have all been dreaming about riding dragons, very special dragons. Hopefully you’re going to do just that. But first you need a short history lesson, so settle yourselves down and get comfortable. Welcome to Dragon 101!”

Jeffery then began to give them a brief history of the dragons and their time in early earth history.

“It seems that ages ago Dragons and men worked together. They were a team on this planet. From what I could get from Jake and the other Dragons it was only in a certain area of the earth. It was a very mountainous region, and very high up. I was thinking the Himalayas, but they said no, there were four seasons each year. So I am not quite sure where it was located. But the important thing we are getting at is that they worked as a team. This was not a very safe time on the planet, what with all the dinosaurs, and large predators. The dragons and their riders kept the farmers safe. In tribute, the farmers shared a portion of their crops with them every year. Then some kind of calamity occurred; some catastrophe that engulfed the entire world. Dragons and riders were killed off. Jake believes that this was around the time of the great flood. Whatever it was, dragons and riders were wiped off the face of the earth, or so it seemed. Man forgot all about dragons as their helpmates. Except for in folklore, all records and knowledge seemed to have been lost. And so it went for thousands of years.”

“Dragons, in the egg stage, intuitively seek out their rider. Communication is on a telepathic level. If they cannot find a rider before the egg hardens; they will go insane. Daniel has explained how Archeologists stumbled into an egg chamber without realizing what they were doing. They brushed against some eggs and woke them; all it took was one touch. We can see the repercussions this caused by the state of our own world. These dragons are considered to be rogues; they flame and kill anything and everything. They are aware of the locations of all the hatching grounds on this continent. They will awake their brothers, and they will spread destruction and death across the globe. We are going to stop them.”

“Now as to your dragons; once you make contact you will find them to be very intelligent. Dragons are born with all knowledge; it is available when it is needed. This knowledge is shared with their rider when they hatch and see each other for the first time. There is a ritual that each dragon must follow. This process is called enhancement. The rider and the dragon are both engulfed by an energy force that changes them physically. Their bodies are brought to physical perfection, and their minds share the knowledge. This causes a deep bond between the dragon and his or her rider.”

“You all remember Michael, rider of Lady Jennie. Four years ago Michael went to the same place Kate had gone a week previously, and retrieved his own egg. He cared for his egg, talked to her, sang to her, and did everything she asked him to do. When Lady Jennie hatched he was the first person she saw; he was 10 years old at the time.”

“No way!” echoed throughout the cavern.

“You were all commenting on how beautiful Lady Sally was and how lucky Michael was to have her. When she entered the hatching grounds three months ago, Lady Sally was 9 years old.

“Son-of-a-bitch,” exclaimed Andrew, **“I don’t believe it.”**

“When Lady Kate found Jake, and began the journey that would lead us all here, she was seventy-four years old. She had lived her life; or so she thought. After the enhancement, she appeared as you see her today.”

“Wow! All right,” they all said.

“This is what you have to look forward to if you choose to be a rider. It is hard work in the beginning. First you must be able to connect with an egg, telepathically. When you hear it for the first time it will sound like a small child. The first touch will bind you to the egg, and the egg to you. It will feel like a small electric shock.” Jeffery looked around the room at all the students.

“Once contact is made with the egg you will then have to care for it. Rubbing it with oil when in the gelatinous stage to keep it moist; keeping it with you all the time, near your body. Lady Kate made a holder that you will put the egg in and carry with you at all times. While it is small take it with you everywhere. At night sleep curled up around it. Those of you with animals; let them join in the care of your egg. This will bond them to the dragon also.”

“Now this is very important, talk to your dragon. The more you talk to the egg, the bigger the dragon. Your dragon will share a great deal of knowledge with you. Tell him, or her, what you are doing during the day. Share stories about your life; tell it about your families that have passed on. Tell it about your feelings of all this; share yourself with it. Praise it constantly using your own mind. This is going to be your friend and companion for the rest of your life. You can tell him anything; he will never judge you; he will always be there for you.” He looked at all these young people and he saw the future of the world. **“Now, I’d like you to all stand, and one at a time, state your name and age.”**

“I’m Jason, 17; I’m Andrea, 16; I’m Gus, 17; I’m Emily, 15; I’m Will, 16; I’m Andrew, 15; I’m Lance, 15; I’m Roger, 15; I’m his brother Ben, 16; Susie, 14, and Darla, 14, we’re twins; Robert, 15; Taylor, 13; Sean, 15, Jim 14, Tim, 14; Mary, 15; Maria, 15; Diana, 14; Linda, 14.

“You are a good group, young and quick to understand. Those of you who do not dream of riding a dragon sit down.” Jeffery was surprised to see them all still standing. **“This is very good. I now turn this meeting over to Jake.**

Jake stepped forward and lowered his head to the students, *Good morning, young warriors. You have heard what is required of you. Do you consent willingly to becoming a Dragon Rider of the Light?*

Yes, flowed from the mind of each of the young candidates in the Riders Hall.

“Wait! They..... *they are only children!* It was Alex, maternal instincts kicked in and she was afraid for her children. She went to the kids and faced them. *How can you do this? Think before you take this step. This is for the rest of your lives. Are you sure that you know what you are doing?*

Alex, John, I speak for us all. It was Jason who stepped forward and answered for them all. We all decided long ago to see this to the end. We all freely decided that this was our destiny. We love you and John as our parents, but you cannot stop us from doing this; we want it!

John went to Alex and put his arm around her; *she's just a bit protective Jake. You all know how she can get sometimes. She loves you all as if she birthed you herself. I have every confidence in you, and I trust Jake with your lives. He turned around and faced Jake. They are all yours Jake, with our blessings.*

Thank you John, and do not fear Alexandria, they will be well protected. Someone must become the fighters for this new world of ours, why not these exceptional young warriors? Turning around and facing the students Jake continued; do you all wish to go to the hatching ground? My Queen says that the eggs are almost ready to make first contact. You can all see the eggs for yourselves. Daniel and My Lady will instruct you.

Yes, yes! The students were all shouting in their minds.

“Ok guys listen up,” Daniel began. “When we go into the chamber I want you all to be very quiet. No talking, whispering, nothing. I want you all to look around and adjust your eyes to the near dark. You will see my beautiful Queenie standing guard over her eggs. You must bow to her in respect, and ask her telepathically if you may see her children. Jake will allow this conversation to take place. She will nod to you, then go into the second chamber and stand silently against the wall. Just stand and listen; do nothing else, understand?”

They all shook their heads in agreement.

“Though I do not think this will happen, if any of you hear a small child calling to you raise your hand,” Kate instructed them. “We will come to you and show you what to do. Understood?”

“All right then, line up and follow me.” Daniel led them towards the back of the Hall and down a set of stairs to the outside of the mountain. They continued down the side of the mountain until they came to a rather large boulder. Daniel, Jason, and with several of the boys helping, managed to roll the boulder aside. There was an opening and they all filed inside.

It was a huge cavern, big enough for a large dragon. They stood against the wall as instructed and let their eyes adjust to the dark. Gus was the first to see Queenie. Instead of looking around, he looked up; and there she was looming over them like a giant silver phantom. He elbowed Jason and pointed up. There was a noticeable intake of breath from them all.

She was enjoying their reaction to her beauty. But then of course she was a Queen; so why shouldn't they marvel at her.

They all bowed to her, and Jason stepped forward and spoke. *Gracious Queen, my you are absolutely beautiful! We have been chosen by Jake to become the next dragon riders; we humbly ask for permission to see your eggs. Please?*

My, my, but you are courteous! She answered in a smooth, silky voice. *Yes young warriors go into the chamber and gaze upon my beautiful children.*

They entered the chamber and lined up around the wall. They could see the eggs in the center of the chamber. They were different colors, very pale but you could see there were blue, green and red hues. They all stood there silently, and each one tried to hear a call.

Andrew listened intently; he was sure there were sounds, but he wasn't sure what they were. Then he heard a tiny voice.

Hello? Is someone there? Can you hear me?

Andrew looked around, no one else was hearing it, no one else moved. He was unsure if he was really hearing it. He wasn't sure if he should put his hand up.

Please, is someone there? I can feel you near. A small tiny female voice said, then she started to cry. *Please, can you hear me? Don't go away! Please...!*

Yes, I'm here. Andrew blurted out. *Please don't cry; I can hear you; I'll try to find you.*

Andrew's hand shot up. Kate looked at Daniel in amazement and went over to him right away. She was shocked that anyone would hear their dragon so soon.

"Are you sure Andrew?" He shook his head yes; his eyes were huge as he look up at her. He was as surprised as Kate. "Did you answer him?"

"It's a her Lady Kate, and yes I did." Andrew wasn't sure if he did the right thing, hesitation in his voice, "she was getting very upset; I wanted to calm her down."

Kate smiled, "you did the right thing Andrew. Now listen carefully; I want you to see if you can locate her. Go forward, but be very careful not to touch any of the other eggs. Try to calm her, do you understand Andrew?"

He nodded and slowly started forward, calling out with his mind. *Little one, where are you? I'm trying to find you. Can you help me? Tell you what I'm going to do; I'll wave my hand very slowly over each egg. Let me know when you see my shadow.* He slowly moved around the clutch of eggs, moving his hand over each egg. As he came to a small light tan egg he moved his hand across the top of it.

Is that you? I just saw a shadow pass above me. The excited little voice told him.

Yes, that's me. Andrew was very excited. *Are you ok?*

I am now. Please, she begged him, *can you pick me up?*

“Daniel, she wants me to pick her up.” Andrew’s eyes were wide and Daniel could see that he was shaking with excitement. “What do I do?”

My young warrior, interjected the Queen, It seems you have attracted one of my children. You must pick her up so that she may bond with you.

Andrew looked at all of his friends, and at Kate and Daniel, who nodded for him to go ahead and pick her up. He took a step forward; bent over and gently picked up the egg and held it out in front of him. There was an immediate discharge of electricity and Andrew felt a jolt. He plopped down on his butt still holding the egg.

I hope I didn’t hurt you. Oh.... you have a lovely mind. And we have two dogs! Oh my, we are very lucky. I am so happy that we found each other.

Yes! Oh yes, you are so beautiful! I can feel you too! And you are my friend.

Andrew was babbling in his mind. He was totally oblivious to anything going on around him. The look on his face told it all. His friends all saw the change in his appearance, the sheer joy on his face; and there was not one of them who did not want to experience the same thing.

“Are there anymore?” Kate whispered.

All of their heads shook no in answer to her question. They were all staring at their friend, and the look on his face. She knew that Andrew would be unable to communicate to anyone for a while. She motioned to the children to leave the egg chamber. As they did, they could all hear the Queen in the outer chamber purring. It was a very soothing sound.

“Kate, I’ll stay here with Andrew.” Daniel offered. “When he’s ready I’ll bring him. You take the kids down to their cave and let them talk this out.” She agreed and she ushered them all out of the chamber.

Daniel returned to the egg chamber to check on Andrew. He remembered how it was when he and Queenie found each other. Andrew had a series of wonders to yet encounter.

Your young warrior is enthralled with his new companion, My Daniel. For one so young, he has a great affinity for creatures. They naturally bond with him because of this trait. Not very many of your kind have this ability. The others were amazed by his actions; did you see their faces My Daniel? They were in awe of my lovely children.

Yes Queenie, I saw them. But then your children are very beautiful, Daniel told her.

She began purring louder, showing her content. Daniel sat down and leaned against the side of the cavern and waited for Andrew to come back to reality.

Kate returned the rest of the students back to their cave so they could better discuss this turn of events. They were all talking among themselves when Alexandria entered. She looked around and immediately saw that something had happened.

“What’s going on; what’s happened?” She went to the young students and began counting heads. She noticed Brutus and Cesar sitting at the cave entrance, “where’s Andrew?”

“It’s all right Alex, Andrew found his egg; he’s in the chamber with it. Daniel is there with him.” Kate explained to her.

“But he’s so young! I thought that it would take some time for the eggs to be ready. Will he be okay?” She was having a hard time adjusting. “He’s always been so sensitive.”

“That’s exactly why he was contacted first. The dragon in the egg picked up on it almost immediately. His is fine Alex, really.” Kate told her. “He’s just caught up in his dragonet. They are sharing knowledge right now. He will return in a couple of hours.”

“And he will be changed by the encounter, Alex.” Jeffery had entered the cave. He looked at Kate and nodded. “Jake informed me of this turn of events, it is most unusual.” He went to Alexandria and called the kids over also. “Andrew will be slightly changed when you see him again. He will still be Andrew, but you will all notice that he will seem to be slightly older. He is physically changing, aging so to speak. There will be a new confidence about him. You will all experience this same change when it is your turn. Don’t be alarmed, it is a normal occurrence.”

“Oh...!” Alex threw up her hands and held her head; “this is all too much for me right now.”

The students all went to her and did their best to alley her fears. Their confidence and total belief in what was occurring finally calmed her. Kate took her down to the mess Hall for a cup of tea. She was much better after they talked for about an hour. She realized that she had to give the children free reign to make their own decisions. All mothers face this day sooner or later, letting go can be very hard on the heart. The other women riders, hearing what had occurred, came over and spoke to her relating their own experiences. She was feeling much better a couple of hours later when Sam came to her.

“Say there Miss Alex, I hear we have a new rider to be! I’d like to fix him his favorite meal. Do you think you could help me in the kitchen?” He was all smiles, big as life. “Of course only you would know what that is; and only you could prepare it for him the way that he likes.”

Alex realized what they were doing and she was grateful for their concern for her feelings. “Well, he used to like Chicken Alfredo over noodles; and chocolate layer cake! I don’t suppose that we could do that, could we?”

“No problem! You and I are going shopping. That is with your permission Kate?” Sam was asking for a ride to the town, Kate knew.

“I see no reason why not.” Kate smiled a silent thank you to Sam.

Several of the women offered to take them. So it was settled. *Plus a ride on a dragon was a real good way for her to ease into accepting her children’s decision*, Kate thought silently to herself. They left 30 minutes later; with Beth giving her a ride on Daowyn. Alex was aghast and thrilled, all at the same time. She could see why the children were so enthralled by their dreams. She understood their decision now more than ever. She couldn’t deny them this; she just worried for their safety.

Back at the hatching grounds Daniel and Queenie had spent the time reminiscing. She broke off their conversation by telling Daniel that Andrew had stood up. Daniel went to the egg chamber and found Andrew walking towards him. There was a marked change in the little guy. For one thing, he wasn't little anymore. His appearance was that of an 18 year old. He had grown about 2 inches in height. His clothes definitely did not fit him anymore.

Daniel explained the problem to Jake and he relayed the information to Lady Beth who told Alex. Beth took Alex to the other warehouse where they picked up new clothes for Andrew.

Andrew stood there babbling at Daniel. "She's wonderful. She knows me, and now I know her. Daniel, it was great! But she needs to rest now. Gosh I'm hungry."

Understanding what he was going thru, Daniel gently took him by the arm. "Come on Andrew, we have to get some food into you."

"Hey, what happened to my clothes!" he was looking at his pants, "my feet hurt too! My shoes are pinching my feet something awful."

"In case you don't remember, you've changed Andrew," Daniel told him. "I'd say you're about 5'11" now, and still growing I think."

"Wow! I'm not the smallest anymore, Daniel." He was grinning from ear to ear. He stopped for a minute and faced Queenie. He bowed slowly telling her, *thank you so much Queenie. She's truly wonderful!*

Of course she is my young warrior. Queenie purred loudly.

Suddenly Andrew pulled Daniel's sleeve, "say, will Brutus and Cesar recognize me?"

"Yes they will, no problem there buddy." Daniel reassured him patting him on the back. "Come on, follow me."

They headed down the mountain and Daniel got him something to eat at the Hall. He was surprised at how hungry he was. He stuffed himself, especially with biscuits and tons of honey. It was the sugar in the honey that his body required. Daniel was wondering if he did the same thing. He was going to ask Kate as soon as saw her again.

"When can I see her again? I mean, when can I talk to her again?" He asked Daniel.

"When she wakes up she will let you know Andrew." Daniel assured him. "You are going to drop very shortly buddy. And you are going to sleep for a very long time."

"But Daniel, maybe I should..." Andrew began to protest.

"Not another word!" Daniel raised his voice slightly; "just take it one day at a time buddy." He patted Andrew on the back. The kid was very excited and he couldn't really blame him.

Daniel called to Jake for help; *Jake this kid needs a place to sleep where the others won't bother him. I know them; as soon as I leave they'll bombard him with questions.*

Michael and Lady Sally have already thought of that Daniel; take him to their cave. They have a place for him already set up. They saw you both when you left the hatching grounds. I will tell them that you are coming. I have already sent Brutus and Cesar to be there with him.

Thanks Jake. I knew you would have this well in hand.

“Come on dragon rider, we’re going to get you to a nice quiet place to rest.”

Andrew blindly followed Daniel up the other mountain to Michael’s cave. He was surprised to see them, and Michael took over. Sally thanked Daniel and shooed him out. “Don’t tell the others where he is just yet.” She pleaded with him.

“Mums the word Lady Sally, I promise.” And Daniel left them to care for Andrew.

“I’ve been thru this myself buddy, so just relax and enjoy the ride. You need sleep right now. Here, put these on.” Michael handed him a pair of his pajamas. *“Your furry friends are here, couldn’t keep them away.”*

Andrew took the pajamas and put them on with help from Michael, after which he sat on the cot they had set up for him. Brutus and Cesar came up to him and licked his face, and nuzzled his legs. He smiled and hugged his friends; then he very slowly fell back and was sound asleep before his head hit the pillow.

Michael came over and put his feet up and in the cot and covered him with the blanket. “He’ll be out for at least a day, if not more.” Michael told Sally.

A strong warrior was born this day, Lady Sally. Rah relayed to Sally. To call an egg at such an early stage is most uncommon. He has a special gift; he will be a fine addition to our ranks.

Yes my strong companion, he is indeed blessed with a great gift. Sally answered.

Emily was the next to find her egg and the electric jolt she received was a particularly large one. Queenie was heard chuckling loudly when this occurred. Over the next month, each of the students found their egg and the process began. They could be seen walking around the camp with their eggs by their sides. Everyone was very busy in the camp. Winter had set in, and it was a good time for the maturing to take place.

Two of the boys, Lance and Robert, never felt or heard anything. They were not meant to be riders at this time; and they seemed relieved that they had not been chosen. It takes a certain type of person to be a rider, and these boys did not fit the mold. No blame was attached by anyone.

That left two eggs with no riders.

Two nights later Jake called Kate and Daniel to him

Jake was waiting for them in the Great Hall.

I have some news that I believe explains the reason for the two eggs at the hatching grounds. My Lady, do you remember the last group to come in about a year and a half ago? It was a rather large group of people. There was among them a rather large man, big like Daniel and a very strange female with him. They had both been military fighters, and they brought quite a lot of weapons with them. She was very short with people; she did this to keep them away from her. She kept to herself, and only spoke to the man. I could not get a feel of her back then as she kept herself shut off. The man had a good heart, and obviously loved her; but there was no relationship between them.

What is this about Jake? Is there a problem? Kate asked.

Daniel asked: *do I need to call the other riders Jake?*

No, no my friends. The man and the female are in the hatching grounds. Queenie tells me that they are begging permission to go into the egg chamber. They can hear the little ones, and they are worried about them. I did finally get a glimpse of the female just now when I probed her. She can hear one of the eggs, my Lady, and she has a good heart. During the great wars with the insane ones, she was a victim of terrible, terrible abuse. The man saved her, and she stayed with him out of loyalty at first. Now, she cares for him a great deal, but does not know how to tell him. They both started to hear the little ones two nights ago.

I would like you both to go down there and be with them. They need to be properly instructed on what to do. I have told Queenie to hold them there till you arrive. My Lady, I believe you will be able to connect with the woman. Daniel, the man will understand you easily, he already respects you a great deal. Their names are Jackson, and Sarah.

Daniel and Kate headed to the hatching grounds at a fast pace. “I’ll go in first Kate, you come in behind me. We don’t know what we will be facing in there. Daniel told Queenie that he was on his way there. As they rounded the bend to the opening, Oreo came up the other side. She pranced inside, and Daniel was afraid that she might attack the two people. They went inside quickly.

The woman was on one knee petting Oreo’s head, the man behind her. Queenie was blocking the way to the egg chamber. Jake had filled her in on what was going on.

My Daniel, they will not hurt my children. I believe they can hear them. The woman was on her knees; I believe she was begging me to allow her to enter.

I’ll take it from here Queenie, he assured her.

“Jackson, Sarah, why are you here? It’s alright,” he held up his hands, “just tell us why you are here.”

Jackson spoke for them both, “we can hear these little voices. They have been calling us for two days now. We have to go to them Daniel, please don’t stop us.”

“Jake says that you are both good people. But there are things that you must know before you go in there. Are you both willing to listen?” Daniel said sternly.

“Yes, we’ll listen,” Jackson answered for them both, a little defiantly.

“The answer must come from each of you; Sarah, will you listen also?” Kate spoke in a gentle voice.

A very soft, “yes” was heard from Sarah. Kate saw that there were tears in her eyes.

Kate began to explain to them what they should do when they entered the chamber. She explained how to find their egg, how to talk to their egg. She told them about the electric charge they would feel, and also about the change that would take place in their bodies. She instructed them on how to care for their eggs; told them everything.

Daniel looked them both in the eye, “Do you still want to go in there?”

There were black markings on Sarah’s face and arms; camouflage to conceal her looks. She reached for the bandana around her head and removed it. She proceeded to wipe her face clean of the black goo. She looked at Jackson, smiled, and held out her hand. He took it and they both turned and walked toward the chamber.

Kate could see that she was really very pretty under all that coloring. She didn’t want to scare the little egg. *Nice gesture*, she thought to herself.

She and Daniel went to the entrance and watched them. They did as they were told, and the bonding took place. Kate noticed that the electric charge they both received was a rather large one. Daniel led Kate to the outer chamber and waited.

“This is really weird Kate, they have never joined in on anything with the other people, and they always stayed to themselves. I mean, they pulled their own weight sure, but they never got chummy with anyone.”

“I think that is all about to change Daniel.” Kate smiled and continued, “I think they are going to make quite a formidable pair.”

Two hours later they emerged from the chamber; and the difference was extraordinary. Jackson stood erect, not hunched over; he walked with more confidence; his physique was stronger, leaner. His face was radiant.

But the biggest change was in Sarah. Her sandy blonde hair was shoulder length now, her face shined with a glow of happiness. She was softer, the anger and fear was gone. There was confidence as she came right up to Kate.

“Thank you, thank you so much!” Tears were streaming down her radiant face as she hugged Kate, “he’s wonderful, no he’s more than that; I just can’t find the words. He was sent to save me, he told me so!”

Kate took her by the arms, “it’s okay Sarah, I know what you mean. It is hard to find the words. You both need to rest now. We’re going to take you to the mess hall first; you have to get some food into yourselves. Then you will need to rest; a lot of changes have taken place in your bodies.”

Daniel was telling Jackson the same thing. Jackson turned and stared at Sarah for a long time.

“Sarah, my God you’re so beautiful!”

“Jackson, I never noticed how handsome you were.”

They had both spoken at the same time.

Daniel and Kate looked at each other knowingly and smiled. *This is going to be interesting my love,* Kate said. Daniel just grinned and nodded.

They led them out of the Hatching Grounds, down the mountain and into the mess hall. They were oblivious to their surroundings. They ate what was put in front of them, and drank lots of sweet tea. They spoke to each other in soft tones. Daniel could see the love that was there between them starting to blossom. He had them follow him out and he took them to their quarters. He left them alone after telling them to come see him and Kate when they woke up.

Inside their quarters, Jackson started to make his way to his sleeping area when Sarah stopped him. "Can we sleep together Jackson, I don't want to be alone tonight," she softly said.

"Of course Sarah," he said as he took her gently in his arms and kissed her; then they climbed into bed, curled up next to each other and slept.

Over the next 6 weeks they became like two different people. The change in Sarah was nothing short of a miracle. She became more outgoing, joined in with the women on things that had to be done. She was cheerful, engaging, offering her help with a myriad of things. Kate could see that she was in love with Jackson. She caught her staring at him one day, and there was no doubt about that look. Then one afternoon Sarah came to Kate. She told her about what had happened to her, and they both cried at the brutality that she had suffered. She explained that she loved Jackson, but she was unsure how to tell him. She still had a problem with someone touching her. Kate told her that she knew for a fact that Jackson loved her; she saw it every time he looked at her. She told her she needed to trust him, and take a chance on love. That she should tell him of her fears, and ask him to be gentle with her; he would understand.

Meanwhile, Jackson had spoken to Daniel. He told him about what had happened to her. She was a member of his military unit. After a particularly nasty battle, she had been separated from her group. She was taken prisoner by a band of marauders; she had been brutally tortured for any information she had; and then she had been tied down and raped at will. This had gone on for many weeks before he found her. After he rescued her it had taken a lot of patience and hard work for her to tolerate being around people. He believed she stayed with him out of gratitude, and because she felt safe with him.

But it all changed after they made contact with the eggs. She didn't hide behind the camouflage paint any more. She seemed happier. She had actually allowed him to hold her for short periods; and she had kissed him, a first. He felt that she wanted more, but she was still afraid. Daniel told him he was doing the only thing he could. He told him not to worry; with enough patience he would be able to get her to trust him. She would come to him when she was ready.

Sure enough, a couple of weeks later Jackson returned from his evening shower. As he entered his chamber, he saw her there in his bed, waiting for him. He went to her and asked if she really wanted this; she responded by pulling him to her. She asked him to be gentle with her and they spent several hours making slow love and healing each other. Later, as they lay in each other's arms he saw she was crying; panic set in as he thought he had hurt her. She told him no, that these were tears of happiness, tears of release. That was when she told him she loved him. That she had been in love with him for some time but didn't know how to tell him. The joy on his face told her how he felt about her. They requested quarters on the mountain the next day.

High on the mountaintop Jake kept pace with the changes. *Their healing has begun. We are almost ready now.*

CONFLICT

AND

NEW BEGINNINGS

With their newfound 'friends', the young students knowledge began to build. A new confidence and bearing was apparent to the older riders first, and all were aware that they were changing. Their link to their dragon eggs pushed them all to mature physically as well as mentally. The pairings between the students began in earnest.

Andrew and Emily naturally gravitated towards each other because of their interest in dragon history. It was through their search for dragon lore that they discovered they could hear and speak to all the other dragons. They were surprised at this newfound ability, and at Rah's urging they spoke to Jake and Master Jeffery about it. It was decided that their ability would remain between them and Jake for the time being.

Jason and Andrea made a perfect match as they were both very competitive and had secretly admired the other. It was inevitable that they would be drawn to each other. They would prove to be very strong in their loyalty, and in battle. Both began to follow Sarah and Jackson, and soon a lifetime friendship was forged between the two strong couples. This was only natural as strength recognizes strength.

Susie and Darla were drawn to Roger and Ben, brothers 16 months apart. They all got along famously with each other. They even ended up taking the large cave that they all initially used as quarters, as their home. Some changes were made to include private bedroom areas; but on a whole they shared the rest of the living areas.

The two boys who never received the 'call', Lance and Robert, sought out Master Jeffery and asked if there was some way they could be included with their friends. Master Jeffery asked them what they could do; and after seeing their writing skills he placed them in charge of detailing the history of the Dragons; they would work directly for him. He explained that he was keeping a record of everything that was taking place; he insisted on accuracy in everything. The boys became roving reporters who went about camp each day and simply observed what was going on. Then when they returned to their quarters in the evening, Lance would write down all he saw and heard and 'felt'. Robert would then weave it into a story with all the other facts of the day. Master Jeffery was very pleased with the results and praised his young charges. He became a mentor to these young boys and they were often found at his home in the evenings with Miss Susan doting on them.

Time passed quickly for the young students, as they were busy learning with their newfound friends. Soon the little dragons began to urge their 'riders' to bring them to the hatching grounds. It was time for them to grow and they must do it in the grounds. Queenie's children reached maturity and the eggs grew to astounding sizes; in four months they were very close to hatching.

Excitement and anticipation was in the air; everyone could feel it, the dragons would be hatching very soon. The students were ready; each had received their final instructions from Jake and he was very pleased with them. Daniel and Kate had kept up with each of the young ones and seen to their care of their eggs. All was in readiness.

Early one morning, Emily was awakened by the sound of her dragon calling to her. Goosebumps shot up and down her back. She leapt out of bed, much to Andrew's surprise, and raced about trying to find her clothes.

"Calm down for a moment Emily, he's not going to hatch until you get there." Andy was trying to calm her as he explained, "we both know what to expect. Oops! There goes my dragon, she's all excited too!"

"Ha, so much for your 'stay calm' theory, Andy!" She grabbed her robe and tied it about her and then slipped her flip-flops on. She reached for a small tote bag. It contained clothes that she would change into when the enhancement was finished; Kate and Sally had helped her prepare for this life-changing event. "When next we meet I'll be a woman, Andy... kinda spooky isn't it?"

"You will always be my Emily... nothing will change that. And when it's my turn, I will change physically too, and join you." She kissed him on the cheek and he watched as she left their cave and ran headlong towards the hatching grounds. "Good luck!" He shouted after her.

Andrew wasted no time in dressing and rushing down to breakfast to announce to his friends the news to that Emily had been called. Remembering the Queen's promise, the older riders all speculated and waited for the news.

As she ran up the side of the mountain, Lancelot swooped down and followed her into the cave and landed on a perch high above. She could hear his keening high above her. Emily was well prepared for this meeting. She and her dragon had spoken at length about what would take place and how she would change. As she entered the grounds she noticed first off that Queenie was no longer there guarding her children. *This means that all the eggs will be hatching very soon*, she thought to herself. Emily looked about and saw the broken shell, and then she smiled and turned around. She found herself face to face, looking into the large golden eyes of her dragon.

"Oh my!" She jumped backwards quickly, eyes wide in fascination.

He raised his head towards the ceiling and shot out a long flame. Emily was overwhelmed by his great size and appearance. He was a deep chocolate brown color, almost glistening in the diffused light. She guessed he was at least 22 feet. He spread his wings and lowered his massive head to her feet and spoke to her. *I am Ash, a mighty warrior returned. I am a Warrior Dragon to the First; sent to rid this land of the dark peril that covers it. I was chosen for you, Lady Emily, and you for me. We will serve and protect this earth together.*

A beam of light shot out of Ash and hit Emily in the heart area; she was engulfed in a bubble of light. She felt so much love coming from Ash that it almost overwhelmed her. She felt herself rise into the air. Ash wrapped his large wings about her. Information began to fill her mind; it was coming so fast she couldn't consciously keep up with it. But she wasn't worried; it would be there, available whenever she needed it. She began to feel the electrical charge that Sally had told her to expect. Now the cave seemed to fill with a mist. She heard Lancelot calling to her.

He is brave for one so small. Perhaps we will remedy that, chuckled Ash.

He began to share his knowledge with her. He told her that they would be the ones to carry the good news to the rest of the country that the black devils were gone and the Dragons of Light would protect the people. And Emily's falcon, Lancelot, was also enhanced at the hatching; he tripled his size and often enjoyed flying night patrol with the dragons

Andrew's dragon hatched next and she was a beauty, the Lady Ariel, mate to Ash. She was a soft creamy brown. She informed him that they, along with Ash, would help spread the word throughout the land that the insane ones were gone. Brutus and Cesar were thrilled to finally meet Lady Ariel and they were enhanced at the hatching and doubled their size. Andrew returned as a man, muscled and taut of body. Emily approved of the change, and blushed at her thoughts.

Brutus and Cesar along with the tabby cats Dottie and Thor, who were also enhanced, made a feisty foursome and kept all predators away from the camp; they patrolled every night from midnight to dawn.

Michael naturally had gravitated towards the younger group of riders and he forged a strong friendship with Andrew. Secure in their friendship now, Andrew finally asked him about Tabs. Michael told him the story of the hatching grounds battle and the death of his friend. Andrew was deeply affected by the tale of Ash and his heroic death. Later that night he told Lady Emily the story, and the importance of her dragon.

Oreo had become the constant companion of Tabs; they ran, ate, and slept together all the time. She looked after him like a mother hen while he healed. Thru Lady Jennie, Michael learned that they were helping each other over the death of Ash. After the hatching of Lady Emily's dragon Ash, they were often seen following Lady Emily around. Finally taking pity on them, she took them to meet her mighty Ash. Upon seeing them for the first time, Ash let out a loud roar and welcomed them as old friends. Both Oreo and Tabs spirits picked after that and they were back to their old selves again in no time. Oreo told Rah that she could 'see' Ash in the mighty dragon's eyes and she was very happy for Tabs.

Jason and Andrea were called to the hatching grounds on the same day. Andrea's dragon was the first to emerge. He was a deep forest green color, and at least 24 feet. He said his name was Juztin, that he was First Wing to the Second of the Ancients, mate to the Lady Jessica. He told her that they had a different destiny to fulfill.

Jason's dragon was a deep forest green also with silver about the eyes and a patch of purple. She stood 22 feet, and had a clear throaty voice with a definite Irish dialect. She said her name was the Lady Jessica, mate to Juztin, First Wing to the Second of the Ancients. She told him that there was a great task for them to undertake. Their dragons suited them well and when given the choice, when the time came, it was with great pride that they elected to accompany the Second of the Ancients overseas.

All of Queenie's eggs hatched except for two. These eggs had changed from a dark blue to a deep purple. Jackson and Sarah were beside themselves with the waiting. Jake told them not to worry that their dragons were very special and it just took longer for them to be ready.

Almost two weeks later Sarah and Jackson were both in the fields working when they received the call. Their dragons were emerging at the same time. This alone earned them a place in Dragon History. They looked at each other and grinned in excitement; made an excuse and then hurried to the hatching grounds. Their lives would be changed forever after this, and they both hoped they were worthy of the honor. As they entered the cave, both very excited, they could see the broken shells lying about. Sarah heard her dragon call to her first, in a rich voice with a thick Scottish accent.

Lady Sarah, my dear friend, please ask Jackson to wait for a moment.

Sarah relayed the instructions to Jackson; then she took a deep breath and stepped forward into the chamber. Before her stood the most magnificent dragon she had ever seen. He was as big as Jake, 30 feet at least. He was a deep dark rich purple color with silver on his ridges and around his eyes. Oh those eyes! Such intelligence staring out at her, deep black pools suspended in a sea of silver. And love, she felt the love engulf her and she was overcome with emotion. *My God! You are gorgeous, so big, so, so....* Tears flowed down her cheeks.

As it should be My Lady! He rose to his full height spread his massive wings and reared back his head and came forward laying it at her feet. *I am Ichor, Second of the Ancients – Hammer of Fire. You are my rider, my friend, and my companion. You have been chosen for me, and I for you. We have a great destiny before us; and you shall be the source of my strength. We have been chosen to join with the Fourth and start a new family of dragons. We are to save those across the sea.*

He rose up slightly and their eyes locked. A beam of energy shot out and engulfed Sarah. She felt herself rising; Ichor then wrapped his wings around her. She felt herself begin to turn, the entire cave lit up with a bright white light. She could feel the warmth engulf her, felt changes taking place in her body. Sarah's mind was suddenly infused with visions of other dragons, huge dragons! Some she had yet to meet; people from her past, and those she would meet in the future. A great deal of knowledge was shared between them. Sarah became totally aware, and saw what would be required of her. She felt great pride, and also great humility at the task that was being given to her and Jackson.

And suddenly Jackson was before her, *Behold he who will heal you!* She felt a great sense of peace suddenly spread throughout her body and mind. Her soul was finally at rest. She was engulfed in a warm white light, suspended in the air, slowly turning.

As he was watching Sarah, Jackson felt his dragon behind him. He turned and saw her for the first time. Like Daniel before him, he was not prepared for the emotions that hit him. She was the same shade of purple as Ichor, at least 26 feet if not more. She had silver on the ridges on her back and around her eyes, and there were black etchings with a small mark of silver at the corner of her eye. Huge black, intelligent eyes encircled by a silver satin sea. Jackson had never seen anything so beautiful. He felt like he was in a dream, she was so beautiful, so big, and she was all his. His friend, his companion, and she accepted him completely.

My Jackson, come forward so that we may meet properly, cooed a husky female voice with a decidedly British, or was it Irish, accent. Jackson stepped further into the room and she reared up and threw her head back and slowly came forward and laid her massive head at his feet.

I am the Lady Isabol, Queen to Ichor, Second of the Ancients! We are here to begin again in the land beyond the sea - to start a new Family of Dragons, and free that land of the black plague. You are my rider Jackson, my companion, and my friend. You were chosen for me, and I for you. Our task is a great one; you and your Lady are well suited for it. I am very pleased in you Jackson of my heart; you are a strong man, a good and humble man, and the right choice as leader of the new family.

Suddenly Jackson felt himself rise up and he was engulfed in her wings. He began to turn, as a beam of energy surrounded him. He felt his mind being probed, being filled with all sorts of knowledge. Information that was racing by his conscious mind so fast he could only retain snippets of it. He saw visions of people, and dragons, some he knew and some he had yet to meet. Huge amounts of knowledge filled his mind. He saw Sarah, saw into her very being and felt such love emanating from her that his heart was filled. He was suddenly aware that Ichor was speaking to the both of them.

You both have been chosen to be the Leaders of the New Family of the Dragons of Light that will begin overseas. Because of what you both have been through and overcome; you were best suited to understand the demands of leadership.

You will have to build up a flying army, as was done here, and free the people of Europe from their burning captors. Can you both accept this task? Can you both leave your home here and start anew overseas? Do you both consent to this task that is asked of you?

Yes, they answered in unison, we accept this honor with great humility.

Both dragons roared loudly. Ichor opened his wings, and Lady Isabol did the same. Sarah and Jackson faced each other and a beam of light shot out and bonded them to each other and to their dragons. It was then, suspended in the air, connected to each other, that Sarah's spirit was finally healed forever. She felt so much love for Jackson, and for her mighty dragon that there was no room for any negativity. She openly wept tears of relief at last.

We are most pleased in you both. Lady Isabol began a soft purring sound. Ichor roared the Dragon Chant of Approval so loud that the mountain shook. From outside all the dragons joined in and the vibration was felt throughout the valley. Both dragons left the hatching grounds and went to present themselves to Jake. They were then led to the feeding grounds by Rah.

When Jackson and Sarah emerged from the cave, there was a remarkable change in them. No longer was there any doubt in their minds as to what they could and could not do. They were changed in appearance; they were stronger, more muscular, their bodies fine-tuned to perfection, every inch leaders among men. They descended the mountain and walked with an air of confidence that wasn't present before. All below noticed the difference, but it was Daniel who recognized them as fellow leaders.

Jake, am I seeing what I think I am seeing? Those two are not just riders anymore; they are leaders. They have some special task ahead of them, don't they?

Yes Daniel, as always you are most perceptive. They will be the leaders of a new family on the other continent. They will free those overseas from the black plague. But keep this to yourself for now, share it only with Lady Kate.

Later that night Daniel and Kate discussed his conversation with Jake. She was not surprised at their being chosen for such a task.

"Daniel," she explained to him, "they have gone thru so much together and they clung to each other for strength through it all. They have great humility, and patience and understanding. Their dragons will keep them focused and on the right track."

"As usual woman," he was grinning at her, "you are right; I hadn't thought of what makes a good leader. They do possess all the qualities, and now they are in great form."

Hell woman, I think we're all in great form, and completely ready for the coming battle. Jake has honed us all into one hell of a fighting force."

"Come use some of that energy and keep me warm my love," Kate teased in a sultry voice. Daniel was only too happy to accommodate her.

High above, huge black eyes twirled with anticipation, *now we are ready for the White!*

Jackson and Sarah were given their own squad of dragon flyers. They were tough flight trainers, but their flyers performed with split second precision. When the time came for them to make the journey overseas, half of their squadron would request to go with them. The two leaders had become good friends with Jason and Lady Andrea. All the riders had been training hard for weeks; the dragons could all act as a unit on a moments notice. The riders were at ease on their dragons; the split second turns and twists were taken in stride. Most of them were beginning to wonder why Jake had not yet ordered an attack. It seemed that he was waiting for something.

Jake began taking long trips with his Queen and Daniel and Kate. The further West they went, the more destruction they found. Apparently the insane ones were destroying every town and city from their stronghold to Nevada. Every nook and cranny was destroyed; they left nothing in their wake. Jake found that they encountered more and more of the beasts each time they went flying out there. It was as though they were trying to prevent something from happening. Jake called all the riders and dragons together.

I have called you all here for a reason, he explained. I want all of you to take to the air tonight and fly out in all directions, except West. Report anything unusual, out of the ordinary; if you see or find anything, do not approach. Inform me immediately. I have been expecting the White to join us in our battle with the dark ones. Collin has picked up the emergence of the White; he will come from the east.

At the mention of the emergence of a White, the Dragons reactions were swift. They called their riders and made ready to lift immediately. Steve mounted Lady Elzbeth and was barely sitting upon her when she took off. Sarah and Jackson were in the air before anyone.

Lady Ashley leaped on to Daowyn as he was taking to the skies. *Daowyn, what's this all about? Your reaction to what Jake said has me concerned. What is this White, and why did everyone take to air so quickly?*

Lady Ashley, Daowyn explained, there has been a prophecy of ours for thousands of years. When Dragons of Light take to battling rogue dragons, it is always Light against Dark. Good against Evil. Before the battle begins, a White would always emerge and join forces with the side of Light. Their flame power was said to be legendary. It makes us look like candles in the wind. To have a White in battle would mean certain victory. The Rider of the White is in possession of the Staff of Light. If the insane ones got wind that a White would soon emerge, they would try to stop it, or his Rider. That explains why they have been searing all the land from the coast to here. You see my lady, the White comes from the East, but his rider comes from the West.

Collin and Becky stayed behind so that Collin could try again to locate the White. He left Becky in the Riders Hall and he went to the top. After an hour and a half of failed attempts to find the White, he threw his hands up in frustration. *Jake, this is getting me nowhere. I can't get a fix. It's like there's interference. Almost as tho... that's it! It's the big black trying to keep me from finding the White. He's more powerful than we thought, Jake. I knew I felt something each time I went to 'see' their plans.*

Indeed Collin, he has become too clever. We must be very careful, if he knows of your existence he will try to destroy you. I have sent all the dragons out to search; we are very vulnerable right now. There is only Lady Maya, Jared and myself to protect us. Daniel and Kate are below warning the town that they must all take refuge in the great Hall. Be very alert my friend.

The big black knew all about Collin. He sensed him roaming about looking for information. He was insanely frustrated that he did not have the use of telepathic abilities. But he knew when someone was probing him.

He raged and ranted; this is all Jakes fault, that disgusting, love projector! He thinks that love is the answer to all the world's woes. Fool! I will destroy him and his friends. From the very beginning that bastard had everything his way, well not anymore. I remember when the woman entered the cavern. I called out to her also, but she wasn't meant for me. My rider was one of the men they fed to the hatchlings. They paid for that error with their lives! In her search for Jake she lightly brushed my egg with her leg. It was ever so slight, but it was enough. It gave me the ability to think, to plan.

The big bull remembered how he hatched and bided his time. Careful not to let the others know of his strength, of his ability to plan. They took him and the other hatchlings to their lair in California. He was careful to conceal his true abilities and kept away from the others as long as possible. When he was large enough, and strong enough he struck. Surprise was on his side. It was so easy to take out the leader and his minions; and it felt so good! Then he set himself up as ruler of these fools. It was child's play to control them. A few deaths for incompetence in following his orders and they all soon cowered from him. He was ruthless with them; they did what they were told, rather than suffer the consequences. He built up his army of devils for one purpose – to attack Jake and put an end to his plans for mankind. He knew where the hatching grounds were; it had cost the lives of many of the females, but they finally told him what he wanted to know.

They can hide nothing from me. My army will overwhelm the First with sheer numbers alone. I will not allow him to win; I will destroy his camp, his Queen, and that rider of his also! This fool thinks that he can change everything; I will not allow it! He sends this creature to spy on me. I will destroy him, break his spirit; destroy what he holds most dear. Over a hundred of my warriors will descend upon them; and they will die if needs be doing as much damage as possible. I will instill such terror and horror in their riders that they will be useless to him.

The big black bull knew he was sending these dragons to their deaths. He didn't give a damn; he had to get rid of Collin, or make him useless. The black's rage continued to build up inside him. He salivated as he held a vision in his mind of his minions holding Jake down as he ripped him to pieces. *Revenge, my dear cousin, sweet revenge!*

Almost two hours later Jared called from on high; *my liege, there are a great many dragons headed this way. I fear an attack is eminent.*

Jake went outside and took to the air; indeed there was a large army headed their way. *I must fly to the heights and call back our dragons. There are too many of them. He sends at least 100 or more, this is not a good sign. Hold and protect as long as you can Jared. Collin, Becky, run to the Riders Hall for protection. He sends an army to kill you. Daniel, Kate, take refuge in the great Hall. They attack and there is no time to get you.*

They were a ragtag lot, not nearly as big, or as healthy as the Dragons of Light. But their numbers were great. As they arrived, 35 of them took to the upper reaches to keep Jake busy. He sent out the call, but his dragons were at least 15 minutes away. He had to buy them some time for the others to arrive. The black devils were smaller; but what they lacked in size they made up for in numbers. They attacked Jake and covered him from every angle. He fought like a demon, knowing that those below were no match for such a large force.

They came at him from both sides, and he was dodging flames and destroying dragons with nonstop speed. But as soon as he destroyed one, another took its place immediately. It was then that Jake realized that this was a planned attack - to do deadly harm. He could hear the battle below; they were putting up a fierce fight. A great fear began to penetrate his heart; he suddenly knew that someone would fall.

And then he heard Jared send out a cry for help. *My Liege, we need help. They have sent too many at us. There are at least 30 of them on me; they have us trapped in the Riders Hall, I cannot get out or get to... No! Nooo My Lady!*

Jake was in the midst of flaming one when a terrible dread hit him. He knew that someone below had paid the supreme price in battle. There was a horrible wail, and then he heard a loud thunderous roar. It was then that he saw something fly by him and incinerate all the dragons he was fighting with. It was just a blur, a white streak. He flew below and as he approached he saw the black dragons falling in large numbers. They were being turned to ash before his eyes as a white blur darted from dragon to dragon at lightening speed. The mountaintop was awash in black dragons; both living and dead. Jake tried to fight his way thru them, but there were just too many. Gradually, as he battled these monsters, he began to make some headway. Several times he caught a brief glimpse of the White in his peripheral vision. It was incinerating dragons as it passed thru the throng. Then suddenly he heard Kate frantically calling from below.

All the while Jake had been battling the dragons in the air, Kate was in the throes of battle along with him. Daniel held her as she went thru each thrust and each rendering of the flame. She was thrashing about and he feared that she would injure herself. She flailed about and roared as the battle continued. With each hit they got on Jake, Kate was thrown into a rage. She calmed as Jake finally headed towards the mountaintop. That was when she saw a pack of them head for the hatching grounds. In fear she screamed out for Jake.

Jake, dragons are approaching the hatching grounds!

Jake flew like a comet towards the hatching grounds, flaming all the way. The black ones broke off their attack and retreated at the horror that was coming at them. Queenie was safe.

Rah and Lady Jennie made it back and joined in the fray. There were flames shooting out in all directions. Rah caught one of the monsters trying to flee and he ripped him in two with his massive claws. The rest of the Dragons of Light finally showed up and they made short work of these ruffians. They attacked them with a vengeance ripping and flaming. The battle above slowed and finally it was over. Jake flew to the mesa to see the damage they inflicted. The last one tried to run for it, and Ash split it in two and flamed it to the ground.

The entire ridge was covered in ash and blood. As the dragons and riders landed they saw that a terrible battle had taken place there. Then they heard a mournful wailing; Lady Maya was keening the Death Chant for her Jared. It was then that Collin came out of the Riders Hall carrying the lifeless body of Lady Becky in his arms; his pain was evident. The Dragons let out a wailing and keening for the pain he and Lady Maya felt.

Collin looked up at Jake; *this was a message from the big black. He wanted me to get it personally. He sent his minions to kill my Becky, and to make sure that I lived to see it. He wanted me to suffer!*

“Oh God! Becky!” He fell to his knees holding Lady Becky to him, rocking back and forth.

Jared tried to protect her; sobbing Collin continued, he, he took on 15 of them, but they just kept coming. They wouldn't let him get to Becky; they had them both trapped in the Riders Hall. She couldn't get out; she couldn't get away from them. Lady Maya tried to help and they descended on her. I fear her wing is broken; I almost lost her too. Jared died trying to protect them both. Great sobs wrenched his body.

The entire valley echoed with the Death Chant, it was a haunting sound. Lady Maya came limping out of the Hall and joined in the chant. She was terribly wounded; Lady Elzbeth and Lady Jennie went to her and propped her up. The riders were all crying openly, it was a terrible blow for all of them. The women went to Collin and they took Becky to prepare her for burial.

“No! Stop, leave her, please!” Collin called out to them. **“My Becky loved Jared with all her heart. She would not want to be separated from him even in death.”** He turned to Jake, tears streaming down his face. *Jake, please don't separate them now. I ask the right to send Becky and Jared together to the next world.*

Granted Collin, this is as it should be. Rah, Daowyn, bring Jared out to us. Jake could feel the pain of all the riders and the dragons at this turn of events. It was a heavy burden to carry.

Daowyn and Rah went into the Riders Hall and brought Jared out. He had indeed fought a fierce battle. He was covered in blood and ash; his wounds were many, any of which would have caused death. They positioned themselves under each wing and prepared to carry him to the heights.

Collin went to the women and took his beloved Becky in his arms. He knelt down and kissed her one last time, and buried his face in her hair holding her tightly. Then he laid her down gently, straightened her clothing and wiped her face. He bent close and said his good bye. With great sobs he tried to rise and carry her to Jared, but his grief overwhelmed him. Daniel and Michael went to him and took Becky and placed her on Jared's back for one last ride.

Each rider went to his dragon and Daniel took Collin with him on Queenie. They all rose to the heights, and as they hovered there, Daowyn and Rah passed them carrying Jared and Becky to the stars. When they reached the heights, they released him and dove below. As Jared, with Lady Becky on his back, spiraled down, all the dragons flamed in unison. There was a release of white energy and a loud thunderous roar.

Feeling Jake's pain Kate whispered, *Oh Jake what a sad and beautiful send-off for them both.* **Kate spoke from her heart; it breaks my heart to think of Becky as gone. I can only imagine the kind of pain Collin is going thru.**

This is only the beginning My Lady. It will get much worse. Jake told her solemnly. *The black devil has dealt us a severe blow, but we will prevail. Collin will not back down because of Lady Becky's death. He will become a thorn in the side of the black devil. But he must deal with his grief right now. The dragons will keen for Collin to help him with his sorrow.*

Later that afternoon, up above in the Riders Hall Jake was talking to Jeffery. *During the battle, I know I saw the White. Dragons were being turned to ash before my eyes, and all I could see was a white blur passing by me. I know it had to have been the White.*

I believe he will approach us when the time is right Jake, Jeffery told him; *perhaps he has been waiting for his Rider.*

Later that night while the entire camp was asleep, the White called to Jake and they met. He consoled him on the loss of Jared; but the fact that Jared stood his ground against overwhelming odds was most impressive. He was a true Dragon of Light. He gave Jake much information; he also informed Jake about the existence of 22 dragons in Oregon on the West coast who had agreed to join in the fight against the dark devils. They spoke till the sun began to rise over the mountaintop. Jake learned that Jeffery was correct; the White had been waiting for his Rider.

With the rising sun, Jake's heart was heavy with the deaths of Becky and Jared. During his prayers he asked the Creator to give him strength to accept His will in this matter. In answer to his prayer he was given a vision of the two on the other side. Their joy filled his heart and he was troubled no longer

There were no more incursions for the next several weeks, but nonetheless everyone was on the alert. Lady Maya's wing had indeed been broken; there seemed to be no end to the suffering she was enduring. To lose her mate, and then her rider's mate was overpowering; her grief was having an effect on the entire camp. Daniel had rigged a sort of cast on her wing hoping that the bones would knit. Jake kept her in the Riders Hall so she would be near Collin and they could help each other grieve. Also, he didn't want any scouts seeing a wounded dragon. The other dragons came by often and paid their respects to her. A great sadness had descended on Dragons Hill. Jake spent many nights sending healing and consolation to Collin; he had to get Collin ready to accept what was to come.

Kate, with Michael and Steve's help had taken Sam and Big John and about four dragons with her to the town warehouse and stocked up on food and drink and ammo. There was no telling when they would be able to do it again.

About one month after the battle, Jake called Daniel, Kate, Steve, Lady Ashley and Big John to the Hall. He explained to them that he had met with the White. He told them that he had shared much information, some of which would help in the coming battle. And the White had also told him of the existence of a family of 22 dragons in the northwest; 22 very strange dragons. He looked straight at Big John when he said this.

It seems that five years ago, in your state of Oregon, the burning and fighting was at its peak. People were running for their lives. A girl of about 11 years was separated from her parents, and picked up by one of the black devils. The girl fought her way out of the clutches of the black; and she fell as it passed over a mountain range. Some trees managed to break part of her fall. But it also deflected her and she bounced and fell thru an opening in the mountainside. She fell into a hatching ground and landed on a clutch of 22 dragon eggs in the gelatinous stage. Jake looked at all of them, Think of the implications of this alone. The girl received a severe head injury, and her memory was lost.

Over the years the girl and the dragons grew up together. She thinks of them as brothers and sisters. She has been enhanced by many of them; think of this alone! The woman stands 6 feet tall, and the White says she reminds him of the Amazon women of past. She has never met another human being, she thinks and acts like a dragon! She and they fight the dark ones on a regular basis. They think of it as sport; something to do to pass the time. Daniel, the White says they are all as large as me. He also says that they are very fierce in battle. The White contacted their lead dragon, Wolf, after he observed a particularly nasty fight, and saluted them for their valor. Their knowledge contained the prophecy of the White. They were honored he sought them out. He has gained their trust. He told them of us, and our quest. They know of the First of the Ancients, and they consented to join our fight with one stipulation; that we find a mate for their 'sister'. They are all dark midnight blue in color, and their only rider is this woman.

Jake now turned in the direction of Big John. *John, now do you understand why I asked you here? It is your dream.*

Son-of-a-bitch! Burst out of John before he could stop it. Does this mean that I am to go there and meet with them Jake? The dreams have been coming almost every night, and there seems to be some urgency to them. Maybe Collin can figure out what this means.

If we have all learned one thing, began Daniel, it's that the dreams never lie. I'd say you're destined to go John.

Daniel looked at Kate and winked. Jake lets ask them for a meeting on neutral ground, and bring Big John along for 'security purposes'. Inform their lead dragon what we are trying to do, and then see if he will agree. Have the girl there and we can see if maybe they hit it off. If they are the same as all the dragons we have met so far, then they are truly concerned for her happiness. They just might agree to go along with this for their sister's sake.

But John, Kate spoke up, this may not be fair to you. You may not get along with this young woman. She may be just as ferocious as her fellow dragons. We could be putting you in danger.

Shit Kate, John answered, I am not exactly a sweetheart type of guy. You know I'm a bit crude sometimes, and maybe a little short-tempered.

A little! Steve chimed in. You don't do anything little! They all laughed at that outburst, even Jake chuckled.

Big John laughed with them and then continued, Look, what I'm trying to say is that I'm the one having these damn dreams! I know what I'm dreaming! Hell, I can see it all very clearly. I'm in the midst of all these big dark blues, and there is a woman there too, but I can't see her face. Look, I know what everyone thinks of me; most are too scared to get to know me. And the women here are sweet, but frankly, they are a bit fearful. I'd like to find what you riders have found. It can get damn lonely at times. Damn it! Jake knows what I'm trying to say.

Indeed John, I do understand. Jake took over the conversation and explained to the group; John and I have had a midnight friendship for a very long time. It has been these recent months that he has been having these dreams on a steady basis. He cannot see himself riding a dragon as of yet, but he is in the midst of these dark blues. He came to me and we have been discussing them. Jake turned to face John, if you do accept this task and agree to go John, you will have to be enhanced. There is no other way. 22 dragons have enhanced this woman. You have no idea right now what that means, but believe me John, it is a huge advantage. She has all the knowledge of her dragons. You will have to have the same. We will need them if we are to win this battle. But John, if you feel that this is not right, that it is out of your hands, we will leave. I will not put you in any danger.

John shook his head, Lets just see what pans out, ok Jake? As to the enhancement, hell yes! Who knows, maybe all that info will help.

Very well, if you are prepared, come and climb on me and let us get this started. Rah, Daowyn, and Ichor, Jake called to his dragons, I have a great favor to ask of you three.

Jake asked Rah, and Daowyn, and Ichor, to join in the enhancement. They agreed if this was to further strengthen our force against the black ones. Also as a side note, Rah informed Jake that Lady Sally was not feeling well this morning. She had declined any flying for a while. Jake chuckled at this news. The group then took to the air and was soon lost to sight.

“So, what do you guys think?” Daniel was asking. “I mean, nothing would surprise me anymore, but 22 dragons, as big as Jake? Lord man, that’s too much to pass up.”

“Daniel!” Kate was troubled. “Think of John, we have no idea what this woman is like; if it didn’t work out it would crush him.”

Steve joined in, “Kate, nothing could crush him. He is 6’4”, 300 lbs of the meanest, fiercest fighting machine on this earth. He gets along with dragons better than humans. Hell, he prefers dragons to humans! Hey, maybe she’s a lusty wench, like the dragons. He’d love it!”

“Oh you men, you know nothing!” Kate threw up her hands in exasperation, “Didn’t you hear him? He wants what we all have found;” she continued softly, “He’s a lonely man, Steve.”

Daniel stepped in, “This is all conjecture. Why don’t we wait till we meet with them, and then see what happens?”

They stayed on the mesa until Jake, Rah and Ichor returned about two hours later. Jake called to Kate and told her she would be pleased, as would everyone else. They landed and as John climbed down, Kate held her breath. He was still a mountain of a man, but he was refined, the rough edges were gone, his bearing was softer. And his face was rather handsome. His hair was a golden brown and hung to his shoulders. He was very impressive, but it was his demeanor that caught Kate’s eye.

He came up to her, made a short bow and took her hand and kissed it. “My sweet Kate, I think we can now make contact; it should prove to be most interesting.” Kate blushed a deep red; she saw behind those brown eyes and found great intelligence in there.

Jake contacted the White and asked him to set up a friendly meeting under the guise of discussing the coming battle. They could then introduce John to them and the dragons themselves would be able to tell if their ‘sister’ was interested.

The White contacted Jake a short time later and a meeting was set up for the next day. They were all to meet at a large plateau along a mountain range in Idaho. Jake would make the trip with his Queen and Daniel and Kate. Rah, Lady Jennie, and Daowyn and Lady Elzbeth would bring up the rear. The White said he would fly the heights.

They all met the next morning on the Mesa and Rah agreed to have John ride on him. John was dressed in dark leather as the other riders and he made quite a sight. They all mounted and took off. Ichor was left in charge to guard the camp.

Kate relayed her thoughts to Jake, *if the lady in question does not find him pleasing, then she would have to be blind.* He chuckled loudly.

The flight took them a little over 2 hours. As they drew near the meeting place, they were greeted by a group of the large dark blue dragons that glided out of the clouds gracefully performing a figure eight. They were amazing to watch. They did a wide flip and joined up and headed straight for Jake. He was heralded by the lead dragon, *First of the Ancients, Jake, we do you honor, and beg you follow us to our meeting place.*

Young Warriors, we salute you! Jake replied. All the dragons gave a mighty roar of welcome. As they glided to the left and circled the plateau they could see 16 dragons below in a tight circle. They were hiding something in the center. Kate knew it had to be their ‘sister’.

The six dragons landed and fanned out in front of the others. Jake and the Dragons of the Light landed facing them. The humans all dismounted but stayed just behind their dragon’s right wing.

The large blue stepped forward and bowed to Jake in respect.

I am Wolf, lead dragon of this clan. We welcome the First and his Dragons of Light to our camp. You do us honor by considering us as allies. Perhaps you would introduce us to your Dragons and Riders.

We are indeed honored by your gracious welcome. Jake rose to his full stature and began the introductions. *My Queen is very impressed with your size and strength. My First Wing, Rah is honored to be a part of this meeting. His mate Lady Jennie is also honored and impressed with your size.* As Jake spoke, each dragon stepped forward and nodded. Finally they were ready to introduce the riders.

May I present our Riders; my companion and friend, Lady Kate; her mate and the Rider of my Queen, Daniel. Both Kate and Daniel stepped forward and bowed. Michael, Steve and Lady Ashley were next. Then it was John’s turn. *We have brought a friend with us who you may find interesting; he is called Big John.*

John stepped out from behind Rah’s wing and bowed to Wolf. The Blue Dragons eyed him for several minutes and then all keened approval loudly. Wolf spoke to Jake and proceeded to name all of his family. Then he stepped aside and the two dragons behind him lifted their wings. *And this is our ‘sister’ and rider, Diana.*

There stood a 6’ golden goddess; she was big boned, but all lean muscle. She was dressed in light tan leather. Her body was perfectly formed, ample breasts, which lead to a proportioned waist and hips. Her hair was honey golden and shined in the sunlight. Her skin was tanned a golden brown from days of flying in the sun. She lifted her bowed head and looked at them. She had hazel eyes that could bore right through a man to his soul. She stared at Kate, Daniel, Lady Ashley, Steve and Michael. Then she smiled and they were all caught off guard; her smile was completely childlike. She shifted her attention and stared at Big John wide eyed as she sized him up and down.

She stepped back, keened approval at her ‘brothers’, then she turned around facing John and blurted out, “Oh my, but you are beautiful!”

From behind her was heard a low whisper, “there goes the party dudes!”

There was absolute silence. All the blue dragons suddenly shifted and lowered their heads.

Suddenly Big John let out a huge bellow and began to laugh. The woman turned, and saw that he understood. She walked over to him and shoved him on the shoulder.

“They don’t understand girl, they have no idea!”

She looked at the riders and then back at John, and they both burst out laughing again.

Daniel looked at Kate, and the others, and turned to John questioningly; **“What? What is it?”**

John finally took a deep breath, he was bent over holding his sides; he stood up and laughing at Daniel he said, **“it was them you dumb bastard, they can talk!”**

Big John looked at the woman again, and she gave him another powerful shove on the shoulder that almost knocked him over.

This is going to be interesting, Jake... I think I'm going to enjoy this!!

He shoved her right back and she almost went down herself. She grinned at him stepped back and unabashedly looked him over.

“You have a good body, strong thighs and legs, a pleasing face. You are a strong choice for a mate!” her eyes danced all over him.

“You’re not so bad yourself, young lady!” He looked right into her eyes, matching her stare for stare.

“Curl a wave baby, it’s a go!” They all turned and looked back towards the blue dragons.

“That’s enough! I told you all to keep it buttoned up!” Wolf roared at them. The Blue Dragons all cowered back a bit. Wolf turned back and faced Jake. *I am sorry about the deception. May I continue so the others can understand what we are saying?*

Jake chuckled and nodded his assent.

Wolf began to explain; **“Some of us had to learn her language; the head injury she suffered caused damage to her temporal region resulting in the loss of her telepathic abilities. She couldn’t make contact with us; this was unacceptable! Half of us agreed to learn how to talk. I ask your indulgence in this Jake, we did not mean to deceive you. We did not know it was strange until we ran into the crazy black ones. Some of them tried to attack a couple of us and when we asked them why; they completely lost it! Since then we have been able to use it against them. They think we are ghosts and demons.”**

Daniel stepped forward with Kate and bowed to Wolf, **“Daniel, rider of Queenie; she was from California wasn’t she? You speak the dialect of the surfer crowd, very unusual.”**

One of the smaller dragons nudged Daniel and spoke, **“Dude, look at her. She’s grinning at him like he’s a piece of candy, and I think he likes it. This may work after all.”**

They all watched as she and John were talking to each other. Kate recognized what she was doing. *Jake, she’s prancing in and out, being coy, and then attacking. She’s performing the mating ritual just as if she were a Queen dragon! Watch her, see for yourself.*

They all watched, and it was obvious that she was doing what she had been conditioned to do, she didn’t know any different.

My Lady you are correct. I hope that John has control of himself; he is about to be tested.

“Are they still watching us? God I wish they would give it a rest.” John was tired of all the attention. “You want to go for a walk, away from them for a while?”

“Oh Yes! With you, I will go anywhere; I like you. You do not mind that we talk. Have you ever gone surfing? Surfman and I go a lot. Would you like to go? Surfman will take us, he doesn’t care.”

“What do you call surfing? I did it on the water with a surfboard. How do you do it?” He was enjoying her childlike manner. She was a stunning beauty, but so innocent. It was refreshing for him. He took her hand in his and they began to walk away from the group of dragons and humans.

“We find a thermal high up, and ride for as long as possible. One time we actually went around the whole world. Boy did we get in trouble for that one! Wolf grounded us for a month; it was awful. But we passed over a lot of land where there were humans hiding; I could feel them all down there. They were afraid.” She held their hands up, “I like this; I like you holding my hand. It feels very good. I would like you to hold me; I bet that feels even better.”

“It would not be proper behavior; we have to get to know each other first. Then if we both like each other, we could go to the next step and maybe kiss.” John said without thinking first.

“What is that? When do you mate? It all seems very complicated. Dragons know right away, and they just get right to it.” She was looking at him all wide eyed.

He started to laugh. “No, my sweet little girl; with humans it is different. First you date each other for a period of time. A little bit of kissing each time you are together; and then maybe some fondling, all before you decide to mate. And humans call it making love.”

“Oh, that does sound good. Love is the most important thing there is, without it there is just chaos and darkness.” They were still walking away from the group when she stopped and faced him. “But, why all the waiting? What is this kissing, show me this kissing.”

He was taken aback at first, but then realizing that she thought like a dragon, why not? “There are several ways to do this. First there is this way,” he took her head in his huge hands and trying to be careful, he tilted it and kissed her full on the mouth. He felt her intake a breath. He let her go, and waited.

“Oh! Oh this is good!” Her eyes were wide and the grin on her face was enchanting to John; “I can feel it throughout my body, tingling in my breasts. Yes! Show me more!”

John looked at this beautiful woman and unexpectedly realized that he could actually see himself with her. She was different from any woman he had ever spoken to. She was more like a dragon; and he did prefer dragons and their direct approach to things. *Just maybe there is something here for me...* he began to think.

“Big John; show me more,” she demanded.

“Ok, then there is this way.” John took her roughly in his arms and held her close and kissed her hard, probing her mouth with his tongue. He was pressing her to him all the while he was kissing her. He felt her body shudder and tremble, and then he let her go.

She stood there staring at him wide eyed, breathing very heavy; and then she slowly grinned and said in a deep husky voice, “This kissing is a very good thing!”

Big John could see he had started something here. Before he realized it, she had jumped him and they went tumbling down the slope before them. She was trying to kiss him. When they stopped rolling she was on top of him. He quickly flipped her over and pinned her down.

“It is the male who takes the female my dear,” he told her forcefully, “with her permission of course!”

“You have my permission! I want more of this human mating ritual; I like how it feels in my body.” She was totally oblivious of her actions, completely honest, just as dragons were.

“Diana, this is not the time or the place for this to happen. We must show respect to Jake and to your leader, Wolf.” He got up and he offered her his arm. She took it and stood, not too happy.

They began walking back to the group. As they did, he signaled Jake. This is going to work just fine. She needs to be taught a few human traits, perhaps by the women. Jake, she wanted to mate right now! She thinks and behaves like a dragon, which is great, but she is totally innocent of human things.

You have done well John. Come back over here and stand by Rah. We will take our leave shortly. Her brothers and sisters want to see if you have impressed on her. If you are truly her mate, they say that she will become impossible and demand that they take her to you.

Daniel and Steve could see the effect she had on John, he was trying to get control of himself; they really couldn't blame him, as she was a stunning creature. She was looking up at him and grinning like a schoolgirl. She had a hold of his hand and wouldn't let go. As they got closer, she looked at the other women and their men.

She went over to Kate. Kate looked at her and smiled. She looked at Lady Ashley. “Do I look the same? Am I a woman too? Am I pretty?”

Kate signaled to Ashley and she came over. Then Kate took Diana and moved away from the group for a bit. “Diana, you are a lovely young woman. Yes, you are very pretty. You just have not been around humans; you need to learn a few things.”

“Then the man Big John will want me?” she asked smiling.

“I assure you, the man John wants you now.” Kate tried to explain, “It would be poor etiquette to mate now. You have guests, and there is a time and a place for such things. Do you understand?”

“That is what he said also. I like the dragon way better; you see-you like-you mate! There is not all this posturing. Ah but it felt good when he kissed me, I want more of that. Why must he stop?” She was confused about human actions.

“Having grown up with dragons, you only know their way of doing things.” Lady Ashley told her, “Perhaps you could visit us for a few days. See what it is like among humans. You would be most welcome.”

Her eyes grew wide in panic. “No! I will not leave my family. This is who I am, and I will not try to be what I am not! Perhaps the John man will visit me again and stay longer.” She walked away quickly, turned and looked for John, and then went over to him, “please, John, do not leave yet. I would be with you a little longer; I would learn more from you.”

“I’m sorry Diana, but they say I have to return.” He gently caressed the side of her face and bent and kissed her again. He let her go and turning he climbed on Rah’s back. She stood there watching him; he could see tears in her eyes. He felt like a heel leaving her like this. She didn’t understand what he was doing and it hurt her. Thinking like a dragon, she was out of her league with the humans.

As he sat on Rah’s back John began thinking to himself, *why do I have to go? Why can’t I stay, what’s waiting for me back in camp? If this didn’t pan out, then I could always return.*

Jake immediately picked up the change in John’s demeanor. *John, what are you thinking of doing?*

Rah started to take off, John looked down and saw her burst into tears, turn and run down the knoll to one of the smaller dragons, Surfman, he guessed. He watched as he wrapped his wing around her.

Jake and the others took to the skies and joined him and they turned and headed back towards Dragons Hill.

Shit! I can’t do this! Jake, this is wrong; I can feel it in my gut! Big John begged Jake, *Please, ask Rah to take me back. I can’t leave her like this, it just doesn’t feel right. So she does things like a dragon; so she thinks like a dragon, so what! I prefer dragons, Jake please, let me go back to her.*

Jake asked John; *are you sure you want to do this John?*

Jake, I have never been so sure of anything. Big John knew instinctively his life was with her. *It feels right!*

Well spoken, Warrior John! Wolf spoke directly to John. *Return to our sister with our blessings if you so desire.*

Jake spoke to Rah, who agreed with John, and he broke ranks and circled back and glided over to the knoll.

Diana looked up and saw them returning, her frown was replaced with a big grin. She ran to him as fast as her feet would carry her. He barely had time to jump down off of Rah when she was on him. They tumbled down the knoll and she pinned him down, trying to kiss him. He quickly flipped her over and told her she had to learn a few things. She laughed loudly and told him to ‘button it’, and hurry up and ‘do the kissing again.’ He did, for several long minutes; and felt his heart soar.

22 very large Blue Dragons keened the ‘Welcome Call’, and the valley thundered with their echo.

Several hours later, Daniel, Kate, Steve and Ashley were discussing it back at camp. Kate was commenting, “She behaves just like a dragon, even the way she perceives things, it’s the same way dragons look at things; absolutely amazing!”

Steve added, “And poor John, did you see the look on his face when we started to leave? I really felt for the guy.” Steve shook his head back and forth, “but then he chose to go back. Now that really threw me for a loop.”

Daniel chimed in with, “just like with dragons, it was quick. They see and decide, and that is that. Lord, I tell you his life is certainly going to be interesting.”

Kate interrupted quickly, “I think you all missed the point, they chose John. And he agreed to be with her on her turf. This meeting was for John’s sake, not hers. She already knew; it was John they were testing. It was done very subtly; I figured it out when they were watching John and Diana interacting with each other. I noticed that each one was intently studying John’s reactions to Diana. Their whole demeanor towards him changed when he started to laugh. They realized that he understood they were the ones speaking, and he was fine with it.”

Kate looked about at them and then continued, “Yes, his life is going to be exciting. But more important gentlemen, these dragons are going to be very powerful allies. They could make the difference in the coming battle.”

“Well, I for one am happy for John.” Daniel told them, “I know for a fact that he was a very lonely man. He wouldn’t let anyone know, but I could see it every time he saw the riders together. The women in camp liked him a lot, but not in a romantic way. He was thinking of leaving and heading west, following his dreams as it were. I hope this works out for him, he deserves it.”

Three weeks later, Wolf contacted Jake requesting permission to enter their land; John was coming for a visit. As they approached the landing site Kate and Daniel were waiting for them. John was riding Wolf, and Diana was with him on Surfman. The other dragons welcomed them as they landed. John got down and Diana jumped down and went to his side. They could see the difference in her, and in John.

“Lady Kate, Daniel, I bring you greetings from the Blue Dragons. Wolf has news for Jake and I have come to pick up my things. Diana was curious to see where I came from. Kate, perhaps you could show her around.”

“I’d love to John.” Turning her brightest smile on Diana, Kate asked her, “Diana, would you like to see how we live here?”

“Yes Lady Kate, I would be most interested in seeing everything.” She smiled back, and turned to look at John. He smiled and nodded at her and she followed Kate down the side of the mountain.

“So John,” Daniel began, “how is it going out there with all those dragons as relatives?”

“Great Daniel,” he smiled at him and continued, “I admit it’s a bit different, but they have been very nice. I just had to get used to them talking; and God do they talk!”

“Well you sure shocked the hell out of me when you went back.” Daniel slapped him on the shoulder, “but I know how it was with Kate, so I guessed you knew what you were doing. What happened after we left?”

“Everything you can imagine Daniel. She wouldn’t let me go. She wanted to experience everything. Wolf finally stopped her and we all went back to their main lair. I insisted that we had to have our own cave. So they made one for us and moved all her stuff into it. We need to bring back a king size bed with us for sure. I tell you, she is a marvel. She wouldn’t wait, like a dragon she wanted to mate that night. So we got together; she was unstoppable Daniel, damn near wore me out. I thought she would be in pain or something; no way, like a queen dragon, she demanded more.”

“Good lord man, how do you handle her?” Daniel asked grinning.

“Easy Daniel, threats of no more unless she agrees to learn a few things. So she’s learning; you just saw the results of my first efforts. The other Blues can’t believe that I can make her do things. She was very headstrong and apparently ruled the roost thru temper tantrums. Not anymore, and they are just astounded. Don’t get me wrong, I mean she taught me a few things. Listen to this; they chase the black devils for sport; for sport, Daniel! She acts as a decoy, and while the black ones are chasing her, the others wait above for the right time. One time she ran, ran I tell you, across a plateau and dove right over the side onto Surfman’s back, and off they went. Too late the crazy black clowns realized their mistake. The others closed in and flamed them all to ashes. Man, what a rush!”

“You’re beginning to sound like them. Have you managed to teach them any precision flying moves?”

“Daniel, they can fly rings around us. You should see them in action. They could take on 100 of those idiots without any problem. They have no fear at all, and they are extremely fierce.”

“They sound unpredictable, are you safe with them?” Daniel wondered.

“Don’t worry yourself Daniel, I’m part of their family now; Wolf has made it permanent,” he said with pride.

Daniel nodded, “I see you ride Wolf, are you his Rider now?”

“Yes, but he chose me Daniel,” John noticed the surprised look on Daniel’s face; “he came to me and asked me to join him on a ride. While in flight he asked me to be his Rider and we bonded. He respects me, says that I am a good warrior. I can keep up with all of them, and I make his sister happy. He was most impressed that I could handle her.” Big John took a long breath as if deciding something then he continued in a low voice, “Daniel, I’m in love for the first time in my life. And it’s great! I never knew it could be like this, never imagined I could be so content.”

“Well, I for one am very happy for you John.” Daniel patted his shoulder, “now come along, I imagine there are a lot of people who want to see you. I’m sure Kate has taken Diana down to the Hall by now. Everyone will be there for lunch, that won’t pose any kind of problem, will it?”

“None whatsoever, she knows how to conduct herself. And I told her I would be there to guide her.” They headed down the mountainside to the Hall.

Once inside the Hall John said hello to all the other riders, and then Kate came into the Hall with Diana. There was a hushed silence. Her eyes were wide as she scanned all the people. John broke away from the others and went to her. She took his hand and he brought her over to the riders and introduced her around. She was very charming and quite funny at times. Oreo took that moment to come into the Hall and pranced up to Sally and Michael.

Diana squealed, “oh my!” She went over to her and knelt down and looked into her huge eyes. “You are so beautiful! Please may I pet her?” she asked Sally.

Sally nodded, and they all watched as she made contact with the wildest thing in camp. Oreo seemed to recognize her as a dragon; she purred her Dragon purr, and threw herself against Diana. Diana answered her with a Dragon purr of her own and she laughed loudly and played with her. Eyes were wide, and mouths were agape as the people in the Hall stared at this strange young woman. She stood after a bit and thanked Sally and Oreo. Then she went back to John and took his hand.

The meal was a delight to her, especially the biscuits and honey. She tasted everything, amazed at the different selections served. She was surprised that they had no fruit, and she told Sam where he could find different kinds. She also insisted that Sam show her how to make biscuits so she could do the same when she returned home. She told Sam she wanted to make John happy, and if he liked these biscuits, she would learn to make them the right way. She spent an hour with him learning step by step and actually made a batch of biscuits. As a gift, he gave her a quart of their special honey to bring home with her. Everyone was delighted with her and all felt that John was a very lucky man.

Up above in the Riders Hall, Jake and Wolf were going over battle plans. Jeffery was amazed at the simplicity of Wolf’s strategy. Of course it would take a dragon to see that simplicity was the answer. Jeffery asked Wolf if he thought a frontal assault was the wise thing to do.

Wolf turned to Jeff, and said out loud and very fast, “How would you feel about 10 dragons coming at you, all yelling and shouting ‘surf’s up’ and singing opera at the same time?”

Jeffery backed up quickly in surprise, and almost fell over had Jake not stopped him.
“My God, you can speak!”

“Exactly the effect I wanted,” Wolf said. *Is this better Jeffery? Do you feel safer conversing this way?*

Jeffery was trying to gracefully recover; *I was unaware that you could speak Wolf. I assure you no disrespect was intended.*

Jake stepped forward. *Now do you understand why I kept this a secret Jeffery? The effect on the black devils will be great. They will become confused, disoriented. We will be able to take them out quickly. Jake turned to Wolf, I want to plan for a final assault and wipe them all out in one blow.*

He knows nothing of us, Wolf said, any we run into we destroy. None have taken news of our existence back to him. Surprise is on our side Jake. But beware, if he can he will come here and try to destroy this place. I would leave a surprise here for him, just in case.

Good idea. My Queen will enjoy preparing a surprise for him. Fear not, we will be ready for him. I see John rides you, how does he fair with you all?

You were right Jake; he is a mighty warrior, I like him a lot. He likes the way we run the black ones down. He sings loudly when we battle; and he was roaring with laughter as we ran down four of them a couple of days ago and sent them to a fiery end. He is well liked by the rest of my brothers and sisters; and he likes to sing during battle, which pleases them to no end. He knows opera, something they find fascinating. And best of all he can handle our sister, which is a surprise to us all. She is as docile as a kitten when she is with him. She loves him, there is no doubt; and I believe he feels the same about her. But she is so loud when they mate, and they do that a lot!

Jake chuckled loudly. *The new moon is 3 weeks away. I think it would be a perfect time for a coordinated attack to take place. We would take them completely by surprise. We could be done with them in a couple of hours, and then this world could begin to recover. I shall call my dragons together this night and plan our strategy.*

Jake now turned and faced Wolf. With a mighty bow he continued; *now Daowyn and Ash will take you and Surfman to our feeding grounds; please indulge yourselves. We honor you.*

We thank you for your hospitality, Jake. We would allow John to stay for a while longer; he must miss his friends a lot. And this contact is also good for Diana. She must get used to being around her fellow human beings. She will see how humans live, and possibly realize that she is human after all. We also take note of the new life in your camp. This is good for the future of mankind.

He bowed to Jake and then left the Hall and took to flight with Daowyn and Ash.

Rah came into the Hall. *Jake, a word please. I do not believe that my rider should accompany us any longer on flights, and most certainly not into battle. Lady Sally is sick again this morning; I am sure she is with child. She suspects I think, but she is not sure. I also noticed that several of the female riders seem to be experiencing the same thing.*

Jake chuckled, *It is all right Rah, I am fully aware of what is going on. I never intended to allow the females to join us in battle. They are too valuable to take a chance on their being injured. We go to war in three weeks, by then all will be aware that the females can't possibly go along. My Queen will remain here with four dragons and the women.*

6.

Early one morning several days later as Kate woke and prepared to rise for the day, she was hit with the dizziness again and she quickly sat down on the bed. Waves of nausea hit her and she raced for the bathroom. She returned after several minutes with a cold compress on her head as it was pounding.
This can't be happening to me?

"My love, are you all right?" Daniel was concerned, she was sick yesterday also. She had begged off a flight exercise, saying she was nauseous. He had thought that maybe something was going around. Shit! Who was he kidding? Riders don't get sick!

"Kate, my sweet," he began as he helped her back into bed, "you have to face facts, you're pregnant." She shook her head no and Daniel insisted, "I don't care what you say sweet, you have all the symptoms. You're racing for the bathroom in the mornings; you get dizzy if you jump up too quick, and your nauseous most of the time lately. We both know riders don't get sick, what else could it be?"

"But Daniel, I had a complete hysterectomy when I was 40. The dragons are powerful, but come on, not even they could... there is just no way this could be happening; no way at all," she insisted. "Oh my head...!" Kate eased herself back on the pillow and moaned.

"Kate, can I bring you anything at all? Maybe some hot camollie tea to calm your stomach." She shook her head no and moaned again.

Daniel went down to the great Hall still pondering his conversation with Kate. When he arrived he saw Steve and Michael and Jerry at a table and joined them.

"Kate is sick again this morning. If I didn't know any better I'd swear..." He was shaking his head.

Michael immediately cut in, "Sally's been sick on and off for the past two weeks. I did a lot of reading on the subject, and I think she's pregnant. She says no way, but even Rah thinks she's with child."

"In case you guys haven't noticed," began Jerry, "quite a number of the female riders are suddenly afflicted with this mysterious disease."

Steve cleared his throat loudly, "ahem... does the name 'Jake' ring a bell?"

The four of them looked at each other, "son of a bitch!" Daniel hissed, "he knows all about this! Guys, I suggest we march our butts up to the Riders Hall and ask Jake what the hell is going on."

Just then Sarah and Jackson came into the Hall with Jason and Andrea. Both women seemed fine. They made their way to the serving line joking and laughing with each other and proceeded to load their plates with a hearty breakfast.

Steve quickly commented, "Doesn't look like Sarah or Andrea are affected at all. Lets check around and see exactly who has and hasn't fallen ill with this strange malady."

A half hour later they met at the base of the mountain. "Okay, so it's Kate, Sally, Beth, Ashley, and the twins, Darla and Carla. Any more?" Heads shook, "Lets go pay a visit to Jake."

Jake was expecting them and chuckled when they entered the large hall. He was in conversation with Jeffery and Collin when they came marching in. He raised his head and acknowledged them; and then returned to his conversation. When finished he addressed them.

Daniel, Steve, Michael, Jerry; he acknowledged each one, gentlemen is there a problem?

Jake, do you know that most of the women riders are pregnant? Daniel questioned him.

Not all of them, not yet! Jake looked about at all of their stunned faces, well what did you expect? You all act like a bunch of rabbits, mating every chance you get. Exactly what did you think would happen? How do you think we are going to re-populate this world of ours?

Daniel spoke up, but Jake, Kate had a hysterectomy. How can this be possible?

Jake stared at Daniel intently, was she not enhanced? Did I not say that your bodies would become perfection? What part did you not understand? He stared intently at Daniel and then continued in a joyful voice, Gentlemen, I am happy for the women. I had no intention of letting them go into battle with us. They are the future of your race. We can ill afford losing any more of them. They all looked at Collin, remembering.

In three weeks we go to do battle with the evil ones. Some of us may not come back. I am not permitted to see the battle clearly. All of you will go into battle knowing that a part of you is back here, growing in your mates. My Queen and four dragons will remain here to protect the camp. If the black devil comes here looking for revenge, he will die here. There is nothing on this earth more ferocious than a Queen protecting her children. And as far as my Queen is concerned, you are all her children!

“Is there anything else Daniel,” Jeffery asked them, “we are rather busy here right now.” He walked them to the entrance and watched them all begin the descent down the mountain. He chuckled to himself for he already knew that Miss Susan was with child, and she was delighted over it. She had come to him crying with joy; told him it was the only thing she had ever really wanted. That she loved him there was never any doubt. The very first time they had made love she told him all about herself, holding nothing back. She vowed to be his and his alone from that day forward. He never had any reason to doubt her. He was content and fulfilled in his new life. Privately he had thanked God for this second chance.

They returned to their planning. They had been able, thru Collin, to get a good lay of the land and the dragon’s encampment. They had also received the news that the dragons were a very poor lot. Not really maturing naturally, they were abominations, Jake said.

If we come at them when the sun is rising we will have the element of surprise. The Blues will come in from the sea. They are going to perform a maneuver they call ‘riding the surf’. Wolf says that it is very effective, and apparently scares all of them. They are a strange group, but very effective. John says that they can fly circles around us, and they are very fierce in battle; he says he will be able to keep them in check. And he says he learned something else; they cannot breed, so they will be the first and last of their kind.

Jeffery added, that they are strange I do not dispute, Jake, but when this is over; they will be the ones patrolling the coastline out there. It might prove to be a boon that they will be able to converse with the former inhabitants on their same level, just a little something to think about Jake.

It was about 1 week later at the noon lunch break that Michael and Sally announced the news of Sally's pregnancy. Sally was at least 8 weeks along, maybe more. She and Michael had informed Sam and Lucy first that they were going to be grandparents; news that thrilled Lucy so much so that she bawled like a baby. Sam was touched that Lucy thought of them as her parents. It was shortly after this that the rest of the riders took turns announcing the same news. The male riders were all glad that it was finally out in the open at last.

During this time Kate finally relented and admitted the truth to herself; she was pregnant too! She told Jake first, who approved loudly, and then laid the news on Daniel. She wasn't sure what his reaction would be. She needn't have worried; he was overjoyed at the news.

"I'm going to be a father?" Daniel asked her incredulously as he picked Kate up, spun her around and kissed her. "I love you woman! Oh God, I never seriously thought I would ever be a father. This is wonderful news! Is there anything I have to do; can I get you anything? Oh Kate!"

"Slow down my sweet, I'm just fine. But I do want to make a nursery in the back of the cave; and I want to go to town and pick up a few things." She smiled at him. "By the way, we are not going into battle with you guys. Jake says that we have to protect the future of our world, very smart that dragon."

"My love, I will agree with Jake on this completely. As to the shopping and new room; I will do anything you want me to do. Have I told you that your beautiful?"

He held her again and kissed her. They all made a quick trip to town, and ended up loading the trailer full of baby stuff. The riders wanted the women to be busy when they left for the battle.

Kate and the women got together and discussed the delivery problems that they might have. They all decided to make a delivery room, and go to a hospital if necessary to get the equipment. And then they realized that their babies would be born after the battle. They would be able to go a hospital, a real hospital. And if they were lucky, they just might find a doctor still alive. They decided to make it their priority to scout around the towns, to spread the word that the Black Ones were all dead. They would seek out and find a doctor before the first one went into labor.

Steve and Jerry were put to work making extra rooms in most of the riders' caves.

Oreo started following Lady Sally around wherever she went.

Brutus and Cesar did the same to Lady Emily, and her falcon Lancelot keened outside her cave every evening.

Lady Beth started to knit a baby sweater, and the rest of the women insisted she teach them how.

Miss Susan showed the women a baby quilt she made. She ended up agreeing to teach them all how to make their own baby quilts.

The women would be very busy in the coming months preparing for the new arrivals.

Exactly what Jake wanted.

All during the 3 months since Becky died, Collin had thrown himself into keeping tabs on the Big Black; he practically lived at the Riders Hall. It didn't take long for him to see that Lady Maya was fading fast. She refused to eat, and her wing would not mend. She was very depressed and he knew that the only reason she was still alive was out of a sense of duty to him. She missed her Jared so much, and her heart was very heavy for Collin and his grief. It wrenched his heart to see her so unhappy. After much soul-searching he knew he was the only one who could free her.

Collin went to her. My love, my sweet Lady Maya, Collin gently stroked her, I know why you stay, but you don't have to remain any longer. Go to Jared, I know how much you miss him, my love. I will be joining my Becky very soon now. You see I am to ride the White, my sweet. And he and I will meet you all after the battle; I have seen all this in my last vision. So please my sweet friend, go, and prepare the way for us to follow.

Lady Maya took a long deep breath and she let it go slowly; *my sweet Collin, your mind was always so dragon-like. Yes, I will go and wait for you on the other side with your Becky, and my Jared. Thank you my friend, for releasing me.*

She bowed her head down and let a long breath escape from her and then she was still; her lifeless body slipped to the ground. Collin went down on his knees; tears streaming down his face, and gently stroked her massive head.

The loud keening of the Dragon Death Chant broke the silence of the night. Dragons and riders rushed to the mesa to see what had happened. Lady Maya was brought out of the Hall and they were all surprised at how much she had faded. The White was waiting on the mesa with Jake. Collin walked straight over to him and mounted. Collin insisted the White and Jake flame Lady Maya to the next world. When the ceremony was over they returned to the mesa. It was then that Collin announced that he was the Rider the White had been waiting on. The White confirmed it by handing Collin the Staff of Light. There was nothing left to do, but prepare for the battle the next day.

The next morning Jake informed Daniel that he would be his rider in the coming battle. Daniel was sure that Jake had planned it that way all along. He was excited about the coming battle, but worried about the women. Queenie put his mind at ease by promising that nothing would happen to any of them. She and Kate were planning a surprise for any unwanted guests.

The riders said their goodbyes after the dinner break. They all planned to sleep at the Riders Hall that night and get an early start in the morning. With any luck they would be home the next morning, and the world would be safe again. Jake came in and changed all that.

Gentlemen, we leave tonight. We will arrive with the morning sun, and attack immediately. I want this over with as fast as possible. We will not give them any more time to think. I expect no more than 500 of their kind. The White will fly above; Collin has asked the right of killing the Big Black himself, I have given it to him. If any of you see him, pass the word along quickly to me. Do not underestimate these devils; they can still be very dangerous. Jake reared up to his full height and continued. Now listen carefully my warriors; the Blue Dragons will come from the sea. Many of you already know they can speak - those of you who were unaware, are now. They will attack in waves sweeping thru the black ones yelling and shouting. Be prepared for a circus atmosphere; they think of this as sport, but I am told they are very fierce and give no quarter. John will be riding Wolf, and Diana will be riding Surfman. She and one other will be 'riding the surf'; this particular maneuver is very effective and I am told they will be dropping like flies.

Steve and Michael raised their hands. Steve began to speak first; *I notice that Collin is already on the White. He was carrying the Staff of Light. Michael and I have discussed this change of events. Collin will not be coming back from this battle with us, will he? We believe he is going to his death, but first he is killing the black bull responsible for Becky's death.*

Yes, this is so. He and the White will leave together. Jake answered somberly.

Is there nothing we can do for him? Michael asked.

I appreciate your concern, and the love you have towards your fellow rider. But this is out of our hands. My friends, Collin died with Becky that day, just as Lady Maya died when Jared fell. Collin released her last night to go to Jared. He is going to return to Becky at the end of this battle. If it were Lady Ashley, or Lady Sally – what would you want?

Both Michael and Steve shook their heads. They understood what was propelling Collin, but they were still saddened. The riders all dressed, and prepared themselves in silence. When they were all ready they mounted their dragons. Everyone was ready for this battle; they had trained hard and long.

The flight took off and headed west, they were in three separate squads. Ichor and Sarah had done a good job as evidenced by their squad of dragons. They were flying point and their dragons and riders were anxious for a fight; they were going to get one. Sarah and Andrea were the only female riders in camp that were not pregnant. Only Jake knew why this was so.

Jake headed the second squad of fliers. Rah led the third squad, his group brought up the rear guard. Collin flew the heights with the White.

Out on the coast, Wolf called the family together. The big black bull was preparing something deadly. He had secretly sent his dragons one by one to the desert in Nevada. It was Surfman who noticed the pattern in the dragons' comings and goings. He surfed the thermals up high and followed them to Nevada. There he watched to see what they were doing and then reported back to Wolf, his findings. The black bull had all his dragons out at the missile bunkers in the desert. They were digging down into the earth.

"Wolf, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what they are doing." The concern in Big John's voice was apparent; his tone was urgent. "We have to get word to Jake. The stuff out there is radioactive, and possibly biological. This bull is mad as a hatter; he means to wipe out all life on this planet. He has to be stopped, now!" John was adamant about how serious this was and the ramifications that they all could face. "Warn him and tell him what we are going to do; if they can catch up fine; but we have to take out these guys fast. It's the future of our world we're talking about."

"Calm yourself John; we intend to end this quickly." Wolf was thinking to himself that John was getting worked up over nothing; his emotions were ruling him. "The crazy black cannot detonate those bombs without the codes or the keys. Be cool dude; we have it all well in hand."

Wolf was sometimes annoying as hell, John was thinking. He about to explode with some lovely epithets when Wolf continued, "we leave in a few minutes. Do you really think that I would not see the implications of his actions? He does this to provoke a reaction from Jake. Think my friend; he knows that Jake will be coming for him." Wolf was staring at John, waiting.

"Ok, so he knows Jake will go there to try and stop him. That would leave Jake's camp wide open." The real reason for the big blacks actions was becoming apparent to John, "then he attacks Jake's camp and kills all the women, and the Queen!" It finally dawned on John what this was all about. "This is about revenge, Wolf! Revenge against Jake! This bull is craftier than I thought."

"Precisely John, now do you understand what is at play here. Remember what Collin said about the Bull, '*...he has a special hatred for you, Jake...*' remember, John? The main intent is to draw Jake away from his camp, and then destroy it. We will warn them in a few minutes. What we have to do this night is destroy the bulls' camp here; nothing must be left alive. I leave that to four of you, do it quickly. The rest of us will go to Nevada and stop what has been put in place there. Jake will have to feign leaving his camp and then circle back and attack."

Wolf contacted the White and explained the situation to him. He told him what they were planning on doing, and suggested that he warn Jake to prepare for a major attack. He also told him the bull's strength had increased to over 500 abominations. He then bid the White well, and the Blue Dragons took to the skies to face their fate.

Jake received the news from the White and passed it along to his dragons and riders. Warriors, news has just come from the White, a warning from our brothers the Blue Dragons, it seems things have changed. The black bull has put a nasty plan into motion; he has also laid a trap for us. He plans to draw us out to a Nevada missile base and then attack our camp and kill all the women, including my Queen. I think we shall turn the tables on him and meet him halfway. I suggest we fly to the heights and wait for him to pass by, and then attack.

Rah, see if he sends a scout to make sure we departed camp; if so, destroy it quickly. Our Blue brothers caught wind of his plan and brought us warning in time. They are destroying his camp as we speak; they are firing everything to ash. There are many hatching grounds, and they say they hold abominations; they are destroying every one of them. They will join us as quickly as possible.

A little less than 30 minutes later Rah sighted the lone scout. He made short work of the abomination. The rest of the Dragons of Light took to the upper heights. They kept watch on the surrounding area looking for the black bull and his group. Not an hour later they spotted the first wave of the black bull's army approach. There were at least 200 dragons of varying sizes. That left 300 or 400 dragons unaccounted for. Jake knew that the rest were being kept in the rear and would be used to attack the Camp and his Queen.

Ichor, Sarah and Jackson, Lady Isabol; take your wing and do as much damage as you can. Buy us time to find the rest of them.

As you wish my leige! Lady Sarah, my brave friend, now is the time for us to prove our worth as leaders. We have trained well and our warriors are the best. Ichor faced his squad and addressed dragons and riders alike. Warriors! Let us show these vermin what Dragons of Light can do! Lady Isabol, to my side. Juztin, you will see to my Queen's safety during battle.

Sarah, riding Ichor, and Jackson, on Lady Isabol, came at them from out of the setting sun. The black devils were taken by surprise, which was the intent. Flying in formation and then free fall, Ichor and his fellow warriors flamed as they passed and then did a complete turn around and flamed again. Just as they had practiced in training over and over again, the precision of their arcs, and their flawless dives took out many dragons on that first pass. Most of the dragons were small and not formed quite right. As they swung around the males extended their claws and ripped the smaller ones to shreds. On their second pass they managed to destroy all but about 20 of the misshapen, abominations. These 20 were the hardened ones from the first hatching. They began to fight back with a vengeance, but Jackson and Sarah's group outmatched them. The constant practice of flying while using the crossbows paid off this day. Several of the black ones lost one of their eyes, and they were taken out quickly after that. All the Dragons of Light fought with carefully planned strikes on the dark devils. Realizing that they were out matched, the big black bull left them to their fate. Watching their leader depart in disgust they were disheartened, and they began to loose badly. One of them, in an insane rush towards Lady Isabol, got a lucky hit on Jackson, flaming his left arm and leg, and singeing Lady Isabol on her left side. Ichor let out a roar and with claws extended he went after the unlucky devil. He grabbed the disfigured monster and tore it in half and threw it into the air as Lady Isabol flamed it to ash. The rest of the wing annihilated the remaining black monsters. Juztin and his squad checked the area as instructed by Ichor, and flamed all the remains to ash. They then prepared to leave the area and meet up with Jake and the rest of their forces.

About a half hour later, as they headed east to catch up with Jake, the sky above was suddenly filled with the lost 300; they had laid a trap and now sprung it. A large black dragon with 20 of his cohorts personally sought out and attacked Jackson and Sarah. They fought valiantly, even tho they were out numbered 10 to 1. Ichor managed to send word to the White to relay to Jake. Then he called for his fellow dragons help. The big black had his minion's worked their way between Sarah and Jackson separating them. Then he turned his attentions directly to Sarah. Sensing what he was up to, Jackson and Lady Isabol doubled their efforts to reach them. Jackson feared he would loose Sarah and he fought like a madman trying to get to her side. In his mind he was reliving the terrible time years ago when he lost her to the marauders during a battle. Ichor put his mind at ease and told him that they would not be taken down.

Jason on Lady Jessica and Andrea on Juztin had their hands full as well. They and their squad were kept busy by a horde of the smaller dragons. They were easy to take out, but their sheer numbers were overpowering. They gave their best and took out a great many of the beasts with their precision flaming. But for each they destroyed, two more took their place.

The large black underestimated Sarah's courage, and the bond between her and Ichor. They fought with a ferocity that startled him, taking out 9 of his dragons within minutes. He doubled his attack, and this particular fight took on a fevered pitch. With each horde of dragons they destroyed, more took their place. This went on for 30 minutes at such an unrelenting pace that the large black devil had to pull back momentarily and regroup. They attacked again with renewed ferocity. In the midst of the battle a bright blue-white light began to emanate from Ichor engulfing all the black ones around him. Ichor began to grow larger; even with Sarah on his back, his size continued to increase. He began to take out many more dragons, as he and Sarah went into a killing frenzy. Ten more devils dropped out of the sky and attacked them; Ichor destroyed them within minutes. They fought like mad but the battle was beginning to take a toll even on them. They were getting tired and in need of a breathing space. Sarah received a hit on her right shoulder and back shielding Ichor from a blast to his neck. Enraged, Ichor went for the devil and fired a large blast as Sarah let loose with her crossbow. She got a lucky hit and took out the bulls left eye. He roared his anger and fled as six more of his dragons attacked them en masse. Ichor ripped two of them in half before they could flame anything. Sarah was beginning to get worried, there were so many of them. Then from below she heard the Blue Dragons.

“Coming thru! Pardon us dudes!” Ten giant dark blue dragons flew thru the center of them yelling and singing, sending the blacks running in all directions. A dark blue dragon with a golden goddess standing on its back flew by yelling, “Surfs up! Move it dudes!” Surfman turned and flamed three of the devils to ash right in front of Sarah's eyes. The black devils were shaken badly by these strange talking dragons. They lost their tight formation, and it became easier to flame them. Ichor redirected his squad to back up the Blue Dragons, and they all jumped into the fray with the remaining devils.

Wolf came up to Ichor, *“can you use some help my friend? My brothers and sisters are itching for a fight.”* Ichor thanked him and said he would be glad to share the wealth, so to speak. Big John was concerned for Lady Sarah; she was covered in sweat and in obvious pain. She had a nasty burn down the right side of her back.

Jake's squad arrived and they dove from above bursting thru the center of the second group of the black devils. Dragons were flying and flaming in all directions. From the ground it looked like a free for all to the untrained eye. But each strike was well planned, each formation and flaming was directed at the weakest areas. Daniel and Jake took on almost 10 at one time and they fought like demons flaming and tearing.

It was during this melee that Daniel recognized that the dragons were getting their strength from their riders. This in itself was a major revelation; it explained the pairings of dragon and rider. He would have to discuss this with Jake after the battle. They were flying in a tight figure eight and flaming dragons as they went through their formation when a large black dragon dropped down out of nowhere and flamed at Jake. Daniel swiftly pulled to the left and Jake answered his body movement and turned. Daniel took the brunt of the flame as the bastard got a lucky hit. Jakes rage was instantaneous and the monster was turned to dust before he finished. Daniel received a second-degree burn on his leg, but was too engrossed in battle to let it slow him down. Jake tore into several of the abominations and ripped them to shreds.

Hey Jake, look at the size of Ichor! What's going on there? Daniel asked.

Jake turned and spotted Ichor. Realizing what had taken place he roared loudly and for a moment everything seemed to be in slow motion.

Daniel looked about and saw all the dragons in mid-fight, silhouetted against the sky as they were caught flaming the devils; it was a surreal moment. Lady Sarah was caught just as she had loosed an arrow from her crossbow; her ferocity displayed across her face. Highlighted in mid-flight battle, she and Ichor were perfectly preserved.

Just as suddenly the moment passed and the battle continued.

The rest of the Blue Dragons showed up and told Sarah and Ichor to take a break. Sarah was sweating profusely and panting, as was Ichor. Sarah's eyes darted in all directions keeping tabs on her squad members and also searching for Jackson and Lady Isabol. Spotting them in the distance, she finally took a long deep breath.

You are my strength my Lady, I bow to you this day. Ichor praised Sarah.

You are my life my friend; you bow to no one. Sarah answered him.

Sarah and Ichor watched as the strange blue dragons 'surfed' over the heads of the black ones flaming as they went. True to their word, they did have them dropping like flies. It was amazing to watch these dragons fight; they were all singing as they battled! It was some kind of a war chant, but it was very effective. Many of the black devils fled in sheer horror. They were taken completely off guard, and they were much easier to destroy. Big John flew to Jake's side and told him that the Black Bull who led them had taken off to meet up with about 200 more dragons he had in reserve for Dragons Hill.

The White suddenly appeared before them and Collin shouted, "The black is headed to Dragons Hill, follow when you can!" They were gone as quickly as they appeared.

There were not many of the black abominations left, so Jake took the Blue Dragons and half of his group and headed home. He called ahead and warned Queenie as to what was headed their way.

She just chuckled and said; *let the fool come.*

Collin arrived at Dragons Hill before the Big Black and his group. Kate and Queenie were glad, if their surprise was going to work, Collin and the White had to be there. Lady Kate spoke to Lady Emily and asked for her help in implementing an idea she had. Lady Emily was surprised that Kate knew she could speak to all the dragons. Together they worked on this idea and then presented it to Queenie. She approved and asked what she could do to help facilitate their 'surprise'. She had Ash and Lady Ariel stretch a large white sheet of canvas tenting across the mountains between the ridge and the Riders Hall. Kate had four large poles inserted into the mountain and the tenting was tied to these. Upon it Kate and Lady Ashley projected a frightful image of a terrible looking creature. When this was in place, they set up very large speakers on each side of the ridge. They had everything positioned in such a way that Collin and the White were hidden from view behind the canvas. A very small hole was cut into the canvas so Collin could see. The night was perfect for what they had planned. There was no moon, and the mist seemed to have a mind of its own as it filled the valley and the entire mountainous area. With this kind of help Kate knew her idea would work perfectly.

All the people and the rest of the pregnant riders took refuge in the Mess Hall, and the boulder was pushed in front to keep them safe. The riders kept everyone informed thru their dragons of the progress of the battle.

Kate asked Lady Emily for help in completing this task and explained that she needed her to ask Queenie if she could ride her. *Of course she can, who else would she ride,* was the Queens reply. *And you must come also Lady Emily; how else will we be able to communicate if you do not.* They both mounted the Queen, and the rest of the dragons were strategically placed around the camp. Now all they had to do was wait.

Jake's group with the Blue Dragons returned and went directly to the heights and stayed there. The White contacted them and informed them of Kate's plan. Jake saluted his Queen and told her that she and Kate had an excellent plan. He looked forward to seeing the result. They kept out of sight and waited for the remaining black dragons to make their appearance. They didn't have long to wait.

Jake, we both know that he's going to single out Queenie and go straight for her. Daniel was anxious for Queenie, and for Kate. We have to be ready to stop him. What the hell is Kate thinking! They could get themselves killed!

Calm yourself, Daniel. You have no reason to fear, she rides the Queen. Think Daniel; the Queen has the ability to flame, but only once. It is so powerful that it will lay waste to everything for miles around. This is why it is only used as a last resort. Collin and the White will take care of the Black bull, have no doubt about that.

Jake called to Wolf, Lady Kate has set up a surprise for them. When they scatter would you like the honor of leading the attack with your group, doing what it is that you do so well? It will be then that the Black Bull will show himself and go for the Queen. I thank you Wolf, and your brethren, for your help this day. You saved Ichor and Lady Sarah, as they were spent. For this I am most grateful to you; they have a very special task to complete.

Outstanding Jake! Wolf told him. We did what little we could. I tell you, those two are ferocious fighters. Even wounded, they both fought like devils and gave no quarter. I would honor them to join us if they wish; but I understand their destiny is already set for them; they are to be leaders overseas. And Ichor has already begun to change.

You are correct Wolf. Jake was surprised that he knew. You are more perceptive than I thought, my apologies for misjudging you. You are a true leader of your people, Jake bowed his head, and I honor you and your family.

Don't sweat it Jake. Wolf told him; we take things as they are and do not bother to get upset over small things. We know who we are, and why we are here. We realize that we are unique, and there will be no others like us. We do not have to prove anything to anybody.

Big John spoke to Wolf; what was all that about? I don't like the idea of someone thinking you are less than what I know you are.

John, my friend, let it go. Wolf told him. It means nothing in the great scheme of things. We know who we are; it matters not what others think. And it also might be to our advantage not to correct them. You tell me that the people here were afraid of you because of your size. Do you care now what they think? No, of course not! It is irrelevant! Blow it off man; it is not worth the effort.

Suddenly Jake keened, Ah! I feel the odor of filth in the air. Aha, they approach from the north, perfect. They are about to get a big surprise.

Kate called to Jake and told him to tell Lady Ashley to get ready. It must start at just the right moment. Collin was positioned behind the screen. A thick mist covered the entire valley like a velvet blanket stretched across the mountains. Even Mother Nature co-operated, as there was no moon. Kate hoped that they wouldn't pick up on the ruse. As they watched they could see the mist get thicker, rolling above the mountaintops. Then, one at a time, they could see the black devils penetrating thru the mist. They appeared to be ghosts hovering over the valley. They flew low, hoping to take the camp unawares.

Now, Lady Ashley, Jake told her, start your surprise!

Daniel leaned over Jake to peer below. He couldn't believe what he was seeing; Kate had taken her love of sci-fi to a new level.

God Bless that woman, he silently thought.

Kate had the image of the alien from the movie 'Predator' blown up and displayed on the huge screen. *God, what a remarkable idea, what a woman!* Daniel and Jake watched in fascination.

The mist was so thick that the devils could barely see thru it. The wild dragons came over the ridge, lined up and descended for their final run. Suddenly, appearing before them out of the mist was a huge monster. It was bent over reaching into the mist below. It raised its head, and turned towards them and slowly stood upright, peering at them from beneath a hideous helmet. It made a strange sound and then howled as it stretched out its arm. A blast of intense fire shot out at them and consumed fifty of them on the spot. They scattered like the wind screeching and fumbling to flee. Collin let loose another blast from the Staff of Light and 20 more of them fell as they tried to fly away. The screen then caught fire and went up in flames.

Wolf and his dragons dove on the fleeing black dragons shouting and screaming, driving them into further disarray. Big John's huge baritone voice could be heard singing their war chant, as his Blue brothers joined in. The black devils were so befuddled that they were flaming and diving at anything, taking out several of their own. It was an easy mop up for the Blues. One hundred and fifty dragons fell to the earth below dead or dying.

One big black freed himself from his dragons and went to find the Queen. He would burn and destroy everything, die if needs be and take her with him.

Just as they had planned, the Queen with Kate on her back was waiting on the ridge for him. He spotted her and his hatred exploded; he flew straight at her. Waiting till the very last minute, the Queen darted off at supersonic speed. His hate and rage was so intense that he failed to see Collin and the White come up out of the mist until it was too late.

With the Staff of Light in his hand, Collin yelled at him, "For Becky and Jared - die you monster!" He shot out a beam from the Staff of Light and it tore thru the black's wing. As he went spiraling downward the White flew after him; with claws extended he caught him and tore him in half. He threw him out and Collin flamed him to ash.

The Queen and Kate and Emily were watching the fight below when they were suddenly attacked and flamed. Almost at the last second the Queen 'felt' the attack, she moved so fast that the flames never touched them. From out of the heights descended the biggest black they had ever seen. He was the real leader, a huge bull, almost the size of Jake, with large red eyes glaring hatred at them. He dove and flamed them again, screeching. The Queen again moved quicker than the flame. She glared at him with impudence. His rage exploded and he dove at them again. To his surprise out of the mist came Collin and the White. He attempted to flame the Queen and Kate before they could get away, and was answered with the Staff of Light.

**“Now you show yourself, you bastard! Thought I didn’t know about you. Ha! I’ve been waiting for you!” They dove and circled and flamed and it continued for some time. Collin asked the White to tell the Queen to leave the area quickly. He continued to parry with the black devil.
“You die tonight monster! Becky and Jared send their regards!”**

**The black drew up his last reserves of energy and used it in one final assault with a blast so intense he hoped to destroy Collin. The White reared back and let loose with a blast of flame in unison with a shot from the Staff of Light at the exact same time. Everyone could hear “For Becky!”
The entire night sky lit up. The resulting explosion of white light was so intense that the remaining black dragons were consumed by it also. There was nothing left when the smoke cleared away.**

Daniel scanned the entire area - nothing! *My God, what kind of a blast was that Jake? There is nothing left behind, they are all gone.*

Jake called to all of his Riders and Dragons. *Return my warriors, all return to the mountain. The danger is over, the black devils are no more. Just before the end Collin bid me farewell, and his love to you all. He is with his Becky now.* Daniel could see that Jake had been deeply affected by the battle.

The Dragons of Light all keened the Death Chant for Collin and the White. Now it was time to tend to their wounded. As dawn began to rise over the mountains, they would be able to see the damage that was done. There were many carcasses of the blacks strewn about the floor of the valley. Jake sent his dragons to flame them all to ash. He wanted no reminder of the black devils lingering about. He also did not want to scare any of the people below. He knew that many had seen the battle; word would spread quickly about the riders and dragons fighting the black ones. He was counting on it.

**Many of Jake’s dragons had taken hits, but none were serious. Jackson and Sarah had both been burned. But they would heal. Their concern for each other kept them both from complaining, but it was obvious that they were in pain. Their fellow warriors tended to them.
Ichor thanked Sarah for taking a hit that was meant for him; he hovered over her till he was assured that she would heal. Later that night Sarah would go to him and hug him, she would tell him that she would take a thousand hits for him. They would bond strongly that night and theirs would be a strong reign.**

Big John had received a nasty burn on his left shoulder and arm. When Diana landed Wolf tried to prepare her, but when she saw them all gathered around him she became panic-stricken. She pushed her way thru the crowd of people, and then burst into tears when she saw Johns wound. Surfman spoke to her and finally calmed her. She got a hold of herself and then she took over carefully bandaging John’s arm. The Blue Dragons started keening, and she joined in as she bandaged him up. There was a big sigh of relief from the Blue Dragons.

Daniel had taken a small burn on his leg and Kate was bandaging it for him. The Queen was telling Jake about how brave Lady Kate and Lady Emily had been. She praised how ingenious Lady Kate’s plan had been. It had bought them the confusion and time they needed to win the day.

Daniel praised Kate also, “your love of sci-fi finally paid off. Where you got the idea from I don’t know; but it worked great. The looks on their faces, oh Kate, it was great! They ran howling like a bunch of chickens. Where did you find the screen?”

“It was a tent; I got it from the dealership and cut it apart. I figured the mist would cover most of it. It really worked out great!” she was grinning at him.

“And the real black leader was as big as Jake. Now I understand why Collin was so sick each time he went to check on those devils. He kept himself hidden all the time.” Daniel continued, “But Collin wasn’t fooled. He laid a trap to draw him out, and the maniac fell for it. Good riddance to bad blood and abominations.”

It is over my warriors. Now we must see to our wounded, and get the word out to the surrounding countryside that they are gone. There will still be a few of them out there, but we should be able to hunt them down and destroy them easily. But first we will have a time of rest, and feasting.

The next morning Jake’s prayers were full of thanks that the first battle was over. Now the future was before them all.

Three months later Ash and Lady Ariel were flying patrol hunting for any black monsters in the area. In all the time since the big battle they had only run into 4 of the beasts. And they were quickly and easily taken out. Lady Ariel and Andrew were looking over the land when he thought he caught some movement below. Lady Ariel said she would circle around again and see if they could get a better view. As they were watching a dog darted out of the brush and made a run for a cave opening on the mountainside.

Something is going on down there Lady Ariel. Andrew felt the dogs' terror. He's afraid of us. And the scorched land in the area means there is a dragon somewhere nearby. If we could catch it and destroy it for them, they just might talk to us. Do you think it's worth a try?

I agree that this should be our priority here. Ash chuckled, Let us set up a trap for this beast.

They flew off and hid behind a small mountain in the distance. There they waited, as they knew the dragon would come at sunset looking for food.

“Emily, I could feel the fear in the dog. He was running to the cave for more than shelter. I think there are people down there hiding. Maybe they are the ones from the town we saw earlier. There were signs there of the dragon burning the town. So they must have sought shelter in the caves.”

“I think you are right Andy,” Emily agreed with him, “I could feel the people in there. They are very frightened. If we can save them, then it would be a good beginning. They would start to pass the word that there are good dragons out there protecting humans.”

My friends, I believe we have company. Ash informed them.

The mist started to form across the mountains; they were well hidden from the insane ones view. They could see that there were two of them. They were much smaller and less healthy than Ash and Lady Ariel. They watched as they circled the area.

Andrew, look below, thru the mist. Lady Ariel told him. There is a wounded child trying to make it to the cave. He is a young boy, and very brave to try to make it thru the field before the evil ones see him. We must help him if we can.

Ash spoke up now; let us see if they spot him. We must stay hidden for as long as possible. If the boy is careful he may be able to make it before they see him. If they do see him I will take on the beasts, and Lady Ariel and you, Andrew, will go and get the boy.

The boy was slowly making his way. He was trying not to create any movement that would attract the beasts. Then he lost his footing and rolled down an embankment. The monsters saw the movement and screeched loudly and headed towards the area. The child was scrambling, trying to get up. He lay there thinking that this was it for him, expecting death he started to cry. He saw them getting closer and he shut his eyes preparing for the worst.

The black devils flew above circling and then one screeched and went into a dive. Ash took off at lightening speed and flamed him before he got anywhere near the boy. The devil took a hit on his right wing and went down in a spiral dive. Ash followed and flamed it into dust. He went back above and searched for the other one. While this was going on, Lady Ariel landed near the boy and Andrew jumped off and ran to him.

“Come with me if you want to live,” he yelled at the boy reaching out his hand to him. The boy ran into his arms crying. “I’m going to take you for a ride on my friend. She is a good dragon; she is here to protect you. Don’t be afraid. OK?”

The boy was wide-eyed, scared to death, but he nodded yes. As Andrew rounded a large bush, Lady Ariel was standing there waiting for them. The boy froze for a second, but he saw that Andrew wasn’t the least bit afraid, so he hung onto him for dear life. Andrew put him between one of the ridges just behind Lady Ariel’s neck and he climbed on himself.

“Hold on little one, here we go.” Andrew wrapped his arms around the boy and they took off. Lady Ariel glided over the meadow and Andrew could see that the people in the cave had seen what had just taken place. *They have seen what happened my Andrew; there is hope now.*

As Lady Ariel was making her way to the heights, the other dragon swooped down trying to flame her. She dodged quickly away and Ash dove down on him flaming all the way. This was no fight, simply an execution. He went down in a heap and Ash flew low and flamed the carcass into ash. He then flew up to Lady Ariel and they both flew low over the meadow and landed just beyond the cave opening. Both riders jumped down and Andrew helped the boy down.

“Wow! That was neat! You guys are great!” A dragon enthusiast had replaced the scared little boy of a few minutes ago; his face was all smiles now. He was in awe of Lady Ariel and Ash. He walked up to Lady Emily wide-eyed, “Hey, you’re a girl! Holy-moley!”

“Tommy!” A woman came running from the cave, “Oh my God, I thought I’d lost you for sure!” Tommy ran to his mother, she held him to her and began to sob. “Oh thank-you so much.”

“I’m glad we were able to help.” Andrew said loud enough for all to hear. “We, and our dragons have been assigned this area to patrol and protect. My name is Andrew, and behind in the field is my dragon, the Lady Ariel.”

Emily stepped forward and began to speak, “I am Lady Emily, and beyond in the meadow is my dragon, Ash. We are called the Dragon Riders of the Light. We are here to rid this area of the black ones and to protect you.”

Andrew continued, “The main lair of the black devils has been destroyed along with all of them. The worst of it is over now folks. There are however a few remaining stragglers around the countryside that we need to hunt down.”

The rest of the people started to come out of the cave, and they parted for a man, “I heard what you said. Is it really possible that they are gone now?”

Andrew stepped forward and answered him. “As I said, there are a few of them still out there, but we are hunting them down and destroying them as soon as we find them.”

Offering his hand he continued, “My name is Paul. We’re a small group, only about a hundred of us. We can’t thank you enough for ridding us of those beasts. We had to leave town almost a week ago. Those monsters had us trapped in here.” He looked at the boy and saw that he was bleeding from a wound on his shoulder. He turned around and shouted back towards the cave, “One of you bring my medical bag please Tommy is hurt.”

Lady Emily perked up at this news, “you’re a doctor? A...um, real doctor?”

“Yes miss, why do you ask?” He spoke as he checked out the boy, Tommy. “This will be all right. It’s just a flesh wound.” He bandaged up the boys shoulder and stood and faced Lady Emily.

“Are you a specialist, or a regular doctor?” She asked smiling.

He looked at her and then at her slightly protruding belly. He smiled at her and said in a kindly way, “I’m a GP miss, and I will be here when your time comes.”

Lady Emily blushed big time, “no, no, you misunderstand sir. Back at Dragons Hill there are 12 of us, and we are all due at about the same time. Do you think you would be able to help us when the time comes? We have been searching for a doctor for several months. We can equip a hospital, or rebuild an existing one, if necessary, for you.”

He looked at Lady Ariel and Ash, his brow furrowed, “My God, who are you people?” He turned and looked back at Andrew and Emily. “Oh, we need to talk. I want a lot more information. Everything is so changed, so different. These people have been thru a lot in the past several years, and I don’t want to get their hopes up. My gut tells me that you are telling the truth. But God Almighty man,” he said pointing at the dragons, “those are dragons!”

“Yes they are,” said Andrew, “beautiful aren’t they? They are Dragons of Light Paul; that means they are the good guys. Look, we can settle this easily, if you want, you can come back to our camp and speak with our leaders, see for yourself.” Andrew hoped that he sounded sincere. “You have my word that you will be safe, and I will return you here the next day. As good faith I will leave Lady Emily and Ash here at your camp. What do you say?”

The boy Tommy spoke up; “they’re telling the truth Doc, you know I can tell.”

He looked at the young boy, and back at Andrew. “All right young man, I’ll go with you to your camp. If what you say is true, I know of three other communities that could use your help, protection, whatever you call it.” He turned and went back into the cave and came out with his jacket. He picked up his medical bag and swung it over his shoulder by a strap he had fastened to it. Seeing Andrew watching him he explained, “It’s easier to carry it like this; now my hands are free. I have told the others what I am doing; they will treat your friend with utmost courtesy.”

“She is my mate doctor, and I wouldn’t leave her if I was concerned for her safety. Now, do you mind riding on Lady Ariel? It will get us there and back much faster.” The doctor shook his head and agreed to a ride. Andrew went to Lady Ariel and bowed and made a big show of asking her for a ride for the doctor. It was mainly for the benefit of the people in the cave. She nodded her massive head and lowered her wing so the doctor could climb on. He was clearly afraid, but he climbed up behind Andrew anyway, very much in awe of this great beast. He was instructed as to how to hold on, and Andrew also told him that when they landed it would be proper etiquette to thank Lady Ariel for the ride. He looked at Andrew as though he were out of his mind. But Andrew would not yield on this point, so the doctor agreed.

Lady Ariel took off and glided around the town. Dr Paul’s whole attitude changed, he was thrilled immediately, as Andrew knew he would be. He could see the damage that the beasts had done, and also the areas that were untouched. It took only 25 minutes flying time to reach Dragons Hill. As they approached Andrew could see several dragons coming in for a landing, and he slowed. Andrew purposely let them land first as he wanted the doctor to see that they lived in harmony with the dragons. As Lady Ariel landed Daniel and Kate stepped forward to greet them. Andrew climbed off and the doctor followed.

The doctor almost fell over himself staring at all the huge dragons that were about the landing area. He went around to the front and facing Lady Ariel, bowed as he had seen Andrew do, and he told her “Thank you Madame for the wonderful ride to your camp. You take my breath away!”

Andrew relayed to Lady Ariel and she keened approval at his manners. “She approves of your manners doctor, you have just made your first dragon friend,” Andrew told him.

Daniel stepped forward and extended his hand, “Welcome to Dragons Hill! I am Daniel, and this is my wife Lady Kate.” Kate came forward and extended her hand also.

The doctor shook their hands and starred at these two exceptionally handsome people, “Glad to meet you both, my name is Paul, but everyone calls me Doc.” He turned around and looked at all the dragons. “I can’t believe what my eyes are seeing, this is unreal!”

“We have over 30 dragons here. They all have riders and they all patrol and protect this great land of ours.” Daniel explained to him. “Would you like to go below and get something to eat or drink? It’s still lunchtime, I’m sure we can find something.”

“Yes, I would like that; it’s been several days since I’ve eaten a meal.” He was still looking all around the mountaintop.

Kate smiled at him and extended her hand to point the way. She hooked her arm in his and smiled sweetly, “So you’re a doctor...”

“Yes Ma’am, just an ordinary GP. This place is huge, I had no idea it was here.” He was amazed at the size of their camp. The people were all quite friendly and stunning in appearance. And several of the women, he could see, were pregnant.

“Andrew informed us that you and your people could use our help in getting your town back up and running.” Daniel was trying to put him at ease. “We can send our engineers over when you return, and they can look it over and see what needs to be done.”

“How did he tell you all that; I didn’t see any communication devices?” The doctor was starring intently at Daniel.

Daniel stopped at the last landing and turned to him; “Paul,” he answered him, “we are in constant communication with each other thru our dragons. We all communicate telepathically.” The doctor seemed relieved at this bid of news; a reaction Daniel found puzzling.

As they entered the mess hall, Kate gave Sam the eye, and he came over and introduced himself. It seemed to put Doc at ease. Sam asked him what he would like to eat, chicken or roast. Doc just about choked, the fact that they had food and plenty of it won him over. They all sat at one of the tables and Doc was looking around the mess hall at all the people, clearly impressed.

“Please tell me what all this is here? I am obviously out of my league.” He perked up when Sam came back to the table with two large steaming plates of food. “My Lord, oh yes!” He dove in with great gusto. Kate brought a platter of biscuits and honey and placed it before him along with some iced tea.

“Doc, Paul, we are a small group of people who have been given the task of restoring order to our world. We have managed to destroy the pack of black devils that were entrenched on the west coast creating havoc throughout the country. They were the black bastards that burned up our world.

Well they're gone now – for the most part. There are a few of them still wandering about, unfortunately, but we are hunting them down one at a time.” The doctor was listening intently.

Daniel took a swallow of his ice tea and then continued. “We are here to serve and protect humanity. The world has changed, Doc, and it will never go back to what it once was; hopefully we can all start over together.”

“I will agree with you on that for sure.” Doc said between bites. “Between the dragons burning, and the crazy dreams, I figured out for myself that things would never be the same again.”

“Well Doc, we are going to have a great need for a doctor in about 5 months. Although Jake has promised that the Dragons will see to it that the women will not feel any pain, I would feel better if a doctor was present. We can offer our services in payment.”

“Jake? Who is this Jake?” He asked.

Daniel gave him a brief history of what had taken place during the last couple of years. He was very interested in what Daniel had to say about the dragons in the egg stage. “Let me get this straight, you and the dragons talk to each other, and are friends. This happens after you touch their egg. They give you a nasty jolt and then knowledge and other things bind you to each other. Am I right so far?” He asked as he stared at each one of them.

Daniel perked up quickly, “Suddenly you know a lot more than you did when you arrived. Who has an egg? You, or is it someone else in your camp?” Daniel was deadly serious now. “I don't mean to alarm you Doc, but this is very serious.”

“Please, no, no! I’m not trying to be deceitful; it’s Elizabeth. She’s one of us; she found an egg about four weeks ago and insisted that it was talking to her. I thought that she was going thru a phase; what with all she had been thru – it was inevitable that she would break down. She begged me not to tell the others. Said they would just kill it and she couldn’t live if that happened. I kept quiet, thinking it would pass. And then I began to notice that since she had found the egg, she seemed to have changed. Changed in good ways. I just haven’t had a chance to sit down and think all this through.”

“She will have to be brought here Doc. She has to be instructed on how to care for the egg properly so that the dragon has a chance to mature naturally. It won’t grow and hatch properly without this information.” Kate urgently told him.

“She informed me the night before last that it was sounding more and more like a little girl. She was worried her, said that she needed to be near other dragons.” He looked from Kate to Daniel and shook his head from side to side. “This is some coincidence.”

Daniel made a decision; *Jake, we need to get this man to you so he can be informed properly of who we are and what our purpose is. We do need him Jake, he is a doctor and the women will want him here when they go into labor.*

Bring him to the Riders Hall Daniel; Jeffery and I will take care of it.

“Doc, what if I told you that there is someone here who can answer all your questions, and also tell you things you haven’t thought of yet. He will be able to put your mind at ease.” Daniel wanted to ease him into meeting Jake. “Lady Kate and I are the leaders of this camp, but we share our leadership with one who knows far more than we ever will. You should speak with him.”

“Dr Paul, he has always looked out after us, and always protected us and everyone in this camp.” Kate reached over and patted his hand. “He has healed those whose spirit was trampled, given hope to those who needed it, and has always left the decisions to us. I think you would find him very interesting.”

“And he is a dragon, a very large black dragon with silver around his eyes and purple to mark him as a leader.” He looked at them both. “God in heaven, my dreams are coming true. This is too spooky!”

They both looked at him with understanding and smiled; they had been there themselves. Daniel brought him to the Riders Hall. Jeffery greeted him at the entrance and told Daniel they would call him when they were finished. He ushered Doc into the Hall and spoke to him for a few minutes. Then Jake came forward and Jeff asked for his permission for Jake to speak to him in his mind. That small courtesy was what sold the doctor. (New rules for a new world.)

He watched in awe as Jake came forward, and marveled at his size. His eyes were quickly scanning the huge muscled legs and the powerful wings, and the intelligent dark eyes. Then he heard him, in his mind speaking quietly and very distinctly. He was explaining everything. Doc slowly relaxed, and nodded his head several times in agreement. Several times he laughed, and once his eyes misted over. He looked at this majestic creature and began to understand some of what was going on.

Then a slight electric shock passed between him and Jake, and slowly things started to fall into place; the mists and cobwebs seemed to clear away and he slowly became aware. He began to understand the monumental task that was being attempted by these people, and he understood the part he was to play in it.

Two hours later Daniel and Kate were called to the Riders Hall. The change in the doctor was dramatic. There was a new air of confidence about him; he was very happy that he had come. He understood clearly now how things had changed, and what was required of him. He was most willing to spread the word around to the neighboring countryside. There was a hospital not far from his town, and with Daniel's help he would make it a point to get it up and running again. He thanked Jake for his hospitality, and asked to see him again in the future. Jake assured him they would meet again soon.

"Before I leave tomorrow," he told Kate, "I'd like to see all the women and check them out. Just to make sure that things are progressing, as they should." He smiled at Kate, "and you Lady Kate, shall be first!"

The next morning he woke up early, he felt refreshed and was in great spirits. He had no sooner eaten breakfast when the women started coming into the mess Hall. He was astounded at the beauty of these remarkable women. Kate took him and the women and they all went to the clinic in the town. There he did his examinations, and pronounced them all coming along perfectly. Lucy had asked to come along, as she had been feeling rather tired and drained lately. After her check up he assured her that she was just fine, 2 months pregnant and just as healthy as the rest.

Lucy was dumbfounded. "But I'm in my fifty's, this can't be!" Dr Paul assured her that she was, and that she had to be wrong about her age. She had the body and ovaries of a 30 yr old. He should know, he said, he had just examined 12 of them.

Kate was the one who broke the mystery, "Lucy, you and Sam have lived with us and the Dragons from the very beginning. You gave your heart to Sally when Jake returned with her broken body. You were there for her when she needed a Mom so badly. You accepted her wish to be a Dragon Rider and as hard as it was, you let her go. You have always been there for us all. Did you ever think that maybe all that good would come to the attention of the Dragons? That maybe they would give you the one gift that your heart has always wanted. Who else can heal as they can? Who else can restore a body to perfection as they can do? I think this is a gift from them to you and Sam."

Lucy was crying, as were many of the women. Sally came to her side and hugged her. "I'm so happy for you Lucy. You'll be the best Mom; I know it for a fact!"

When they returned to the camp Kate asked Daniel and Steve to meet them at the Mess Hall. There was going to be some news. They all met and then Lucy told Sam the good news. He turned white as a ghost and promptly fainted. After much laughing Daniel had the doctor revive him. Sam looked at Lucy with new eyes after that, he was very caring and gentle with her. He brought in extra help in the kitchen, and wouldn't let her lift a thing saying he didn't want her to strain anything. In private he cried, and thanked her for this wonderful gift. She told him to thank all the Dragons; it was their gift to the two of them.

After that day the camp was a busy place. Sam went to the town and spent several days at the Library. He found a book on how to make baby food; he read and he learned. He took to his kitchen making and trying out different recipes. He ordered the farmers to grow carrots, and beets, and sweet potatoes in a special area explaining that this was for the wee ones. He was going to be ready when the babies were able to eat food.

Dr Paul returned to his town the next day with three other dragons, some food, and hope for his people. The engineers got busy and had the power back on in a matter of days. The doctor then called a town meeting and explained how things were in the world, and that it was up to them to help in starting over and beginning anew. It was a good beginning; there was hope again among the people. Knowing that the dragons were there to protect them gave them all new courage.

After everyone had turned in, he went to Elizabeth and her sister, Tommy's mother, and they all had a long talk. After his explanation, Elizabeth said she understood why he had told. She agreed to go to Dragons Hill but only if she could bring Margaret and Tommy along. It was quickly agreed to and they prepared for the trip, as they would depart the next morning.

A young man approached Andrew after everyone had turned in for the night. He had a very large notepad with him. He introduced himself as Leo. He explained to Andrew that he was an artist, that he had seen the battle, all of it. He had been inspired by what he had seen and he had stayed up a day and a night to put it to paper. He then asked if he might sit with Andrew and Lady Ariel and show them what he saw that day. Andrew was astonished at the accuracy of this young man's hand. He recognized Ichor and Lady Sarah in mid battle with the black bull; Jackson being flamed and Lady Isabol returning the flame. The Blue Dragons bursting thru the center of the black ones was portrayed with unbelievable force and he could recognize Wolf and Big John. He also showed the White and Collin as they let loose the final blast on the big black bull. Now everyone could see what had happened that day. But the rendering that took his breath away was of Jake and Daniel tearing into five of the black ones. Every muscle, every tendon, every bit of Jake in his full majesty was shown; the fierceness of Daniel and the flames erupting from him was captured perfectly; it was so real that it felt as if the drawing itself was alive. Lady Ariel roared her approval and suggested that he be brought to Dragons Hill to Master Jeffery. Andrew asked the young man if he would consent to this and he quickly agreed.

That morning Elizabeth told her sweet friend that they were going to a place where there were many dragons like her. She became very excited. Elizabeth came up the hill to Lady Ashley and Ash holding her precious egg. Lady Ashley instructed her how to put it against her body and tie it to her. Then she introduced her to Ash, and explained how to mount the large dragon. She helped her up and they settled in for the flight to her new life.

Tommy and his mother, Margaret, came next. She was very frightened as she passed in front of Lady Ariel, but for her son she would endure anything. She found herself thrilled beyond words during the flight; she was in awe of the large dragon. As payment and tribute to Lady Ariel for giving her son a chance at such a grand future, she made a beautiful quilt for Andrew and Emily. She had captured Lady Ariel's likeness in flight; it was done so well that Lady Emily had hung it in their quarters. Several of the other riders upon seeing it requested quilts of their own. Margaret was soon awash in orders for other scenes with the dragons' likenesses and it became the rage to have one of her quilts hanging on the walls of their caves. Margaret had found a new calling, and once again felt useful.

Andrew took the young man Leo to see Master Jeffery. After introductions all around, Jeffery sat with the young man and they went over all his sketches. Jeffery was most impressed and asked the young man to stay and work with him on the Dragon Chronicles. Leo was most agreeable to do so.

Dr Paul returned to Dragons Hill as he promised every 4 weeks to check on the women. And then came the day that he announced to Sam that Lucy was going to have twins. The mountain thundered as the Dragons roared their approval; and Sam fainted again.

That night he went up the mountaintop to thank Jake personally. *You have given Sally and me a gift of untold riches*, he told Jake.

Jake rose and then lowered his head to right in front of Sam. *It is not necessary to thank us Sam. We only slightly enhanced Lucy and yourself; you both did the rest. You and Lucy have both given much to the people of this camp and neither of you have ever asked for anything in return. I know how Lucy's heart broke when Sally left to become a rider; yet she let her go to fulfill her destiny. You are both good people, you will make excellent parents. And Sam, we will be there to see to it that she does not suffer any pain at the birth.*

Sam came forward and threw his large arms around Jake's lowered head. Not a man given to open displays of affection, he was overwhelmed to learn that he and Lucy were held in such high regard by the dragons.

Elizabeth's days at the camp were spent in wonder and learning. Jeffery schooled her in Dragon Lore, and she was very quick to pick up on everything. She immersed herself in everything learning as much information as she was given. Her egg began to grow at an accelerated rate; and it was obvious that she was going to be a very large dragon. The egg took on a greenish tone, and started to harden about 5 weeks after Elizabeth's arrival; and her voice was becoming more mature in tone.

Elizabeth often went to the Riders Hall and just sat and watched what was going on. Soaking everything up like a sponge. Jake began to watch her and her reaction to everything. One day as Jake was speaking to Jeffery; he suddenly turned to her and asked, *how long have you been able to understand us?*

Startled, Elizabeth jumped, and then getting herself under control she answered, *Always, why? I don't repeat anything I hear. The other dragons have never said I should not listen to them. Elizabeth saw nothing wrong with her ability.*

Jake chuckled loudly, *my dear young woman, not everyone can hear all of us. Each rider and dragon can communicate with each other and their dragon with other dragons. I can act as a relay between a dragon and a rider not bonded, he explained. You have a gift that is only given to a leader. You and your dragon must have a special task before you, little one.*

Sarah and Jackson, along with Ichor and Lady Isabol began their intensive training with Jake and Jeffery. Elizabeth sat in the back of the Hall and listened in to everything that was said. Jake did not disturb her as he began to see Elizabeth's future and knew she was learning what would be required of her. Many times she would remain behind after everyone left and question Jake about one point or another. She found Ichor to be very realistic and pragmatic and told Jake so. Jake began to marvel at such great wisdom in so small a body.

Queenie called to Jake one day and told him that the egg on her hatching grounds was of such a size that they would have to make a new opening if the newly emerged dragon was to be able to leave the cave once it hatched. She had never before seen, or heard of an egg this size. Jake chuckled and told her not to worry, things were as they were supposed to be.

Returning from patrol one day about a month later, Rah and Lady Sally were flying along just below the Heights. Suddenly she looked in the distance sharply. A few minutes later she asked him to look towards the east explaining that she thought she saw something on wing. Rah flew to the Heights and checked the land from horizon to horizon; nothing moved.

I think you are imagining things my lady, probably due to your condition. Rah was not happy, Lady Sally, if Michael knew that I was allowing you to fly, he would be very angry with me. As it is, he will know when we land. Rah flew at an easy pace so as to make a smooth ride for Sally.

Sally answered him with a bit of haughtiness, *don't you worry yourself about Michael. I decide if and when I can and cannot ride! And don't change the subject. That's the second time I thought I saw something. Please, let's go over that area again.*

Rah circled around and headed back towards the east. *You are so defensive lately, I shall be glad when you are your old self once again.*

As they entered the area four black dragons shot out at them. Two came from below, and one from each side. Rah was taken totally by surprise. He shot straight above at supersonic speed turning and flaming as he went below. Sally, caught off guard, lost her seating and started to fall. Rah swung back to the left so she could adjust herself and took a flame to his right wing. They were ganging up on him, and he realized with Sally in her condition he could not use any of his usual moves to fight them.

Hold on tight my Lady, maybe we can lose them in a dive.

Rah dove thru them and tried to come out the other side but they were too fast. They kept up with him and were relentless in their attacks. Rah realized he was too far from Dragons Hill to call for help. Suddenly from behind them there was a great flaming. They turned mid-air and rose up quickly seeing the dragons fall to the ground below. Flying above and flaming them to ash was the largest dragon Rah had ever seen. It was forest green in color and at least twice Jake's size. Rah's wing began to throb and he began loosing speed. The strange dragon saluted him.

Hail Rah, First Wing of Jake! We bid you well and ask if we may be of assistance. You have taken a hit, may we aid you in any way. We have come from far across the sea to speak with the First. Is your rider well, she appears to be faint.

Sally was lightheaded, loosing her balance on Rah. *Rah! I feel so funny! I can't ...Oh!* Sally started to slide off Rah. The rider of the large dragon swung over and reached for her before she fell. He scooped her up in his arms and the dragon relayed to Rah that he had her.

I thank you, stranger. My Lady Sally is with child; and very strong willed. Rah turned and looked at Sally sternly. Now she will believe that her riding days are over till she delivers. Please follow and I shall lead the way to our camp. Rah called ahead and informed Jake as to what had just occurred, and asked him to get Michael. And my liege, this is the largest dragon I have ever seen. He is twice your size, and he has a male rider! Most unusual!

As Rah circled and came in for a landing he could see Michael and Lady Jennie waiting for him. The visitor landed and his rider slid off with Lady Sally in his arms. Michael came forward with a worried look on his face.

"Sally!" He reached for her and took her from the stranger.

“She lost her balance when she fainted; I believe she is all right friend. We killed the black beasts before they could touch her.”

Sally had come to and was feeling rather sheepish. The rider smiled at her gently as Michael helped her to her feet. Then her eyes flew wide and she hurried to Rah’s side to check his wing. Michael was right behind her.

My Michael, he will be fine. His pride is hurt more than anything. Lady Jennie relayed to Michael. Rah allowed Lady Sally to influence him for one last ride, he blames himself.

He has no blame, the large green dragon spoke up, there were four of them and they laid a trap for him. He was trying to protect his rider. I am thankful that we were there to help.

If anyone is to blame it is I; Sally spoke up apologetically. Oh if I hadn’t been so stubborn Rah would never have been injured. I am so sorry Rah.

Jake landed and all attention immediately turned to him. The large dragon’s rider went to his side and reached for a strange staff and then went down on one knee bowing his head. Then the large dragon spread his wings wide, reared back, and then came forward and lowered his head in front of Jake.

Hail First of the Ancients! I am called Valotin, First Wing to Alakar, Third of the Ancients. We have come from across the sea to ask for your aid in fighting the black menace on our shores.

Rise Valotin, and ask your courageous rider to rise also. We bid you welcome, and thank you and your rider for his help. Lady Sally is a favorite of ours.

Jake turned and looked at Michael and Lady Sally. Kate and Daniel ascended the mesa and went directly to Jakes side.

My I introduce my companion, my friend, and my rider, Lady Kate. Her mate, Daniel, rides my Queen; we all bid you welcome and thank you for your aid.

Valotin introduced his rider, *my rider, my companion, and my friend, James, he who welds the Fire Staff in battle.* James rose, stamped the Fire Staff twice and bowed his head before Jake.

James you are most welcome. Jake noted the sadness surrounding both dragon and rider. You have both had a long journey; rest and food are needed now. Valotin, I will have my dragons escort you to our feeding grounds. Rhontin, Daowyn, please escort our honored guest to the feeding grounds.

Daniel came forward and took James arm and greeted him as a fellow warrior. “Thank you for what you did for Lady Sally. We bid you welcome to Dragons Hill.”

Michael came over with Sally at his side. “Thank-you James for saving my Sally, my name is Michael.” They shook hands. “She can be very headstrong and obstinate; but I believe she has learned a valuable lesson this day,” he said glaring at Sally.

Sally stepped forward and extended her hand, “thank you kind sir. I shall not ride again until after the birth; when I think of what could have happened...”

James looked at them and answered, “You are all quite welcome. No offense Lady Sally, but you should have known better; you must never endanger yourself, or your dragon. Believe me, I know from bitter experience.”

Daniel decided to change the subject. “James, please follow us down to the mess Hall. We will get you something to eat and drink. Then we will bombard you with all sorts of questions until you are too tired to answer anymore!” Everyone laughed as they headed down off the mesa.

Kate took James arm and led him down the mountain regaling him with the history of Dragon’s Hill. At one point on their way down he turned and looked towards the side of the mountain as if searching for something. He stared at the opening to the hatching ground, tilting his head as if listening. Jake urged Kate to distract him, which she did and they continued down the mountain.

Meanwhile, up above, Lady Sally went to Rah and begged forgiveness for being so difficult and willful. She felt awful that he had taken a hit and been burned because of her stubbornness. He set her mind at ease and blamed himself for not insisting that she stay home. Michael took her down to the Hall for some tea.

James was in awe of the great Hall... and their food. He didn’t realize how hungry he was and ate two big steaming platefuls. He stuffed his face with biscuits and honey, and a gallon of ice tea. Kate and Daniel got themselves some ice tea and joined him. He was a handsome man, she noted, looked to be in his late thirties. He stood about 6’ tall and had a nice muscular body. Sandy brown shoulder length hair was tied back from his face to revealed a rugged ruddy complexion and startling blue eyes. Kate watched for a while and observed that there was a kind of sadness about him. She noticed he would look around the room every now and then, as though he were scanning for someone. Daniel kept him entertained while he ate with stories about Dragons Hill.

“What part of Europe do you come from James?” Daniel finally asked him as he popped the last bite into his mouth.

He swallowed and smiled at them, “First, please, I apologize for my manners, they are a bit rusty,” he said holding up his hands. “We hail from Northern Scotland right now. We’re having a bit of a hard time with the devils. They hit us pretty hard several months ago and we lost several riders and dragons.” He took a drink of his tea. “We had to move our base from England to Scotland.” He stopped for a moment remembering; Kate made a mental note of the pained look on his face. “Alakar knew of the First and his success; so he thought it wise to send for help. Valotin and I volunteered for the job.”

Michael and Lady Sally came into the Hall and joined them. Sam came over and chastised her and then gave her a big hug.

“You have to be careful girl, think of the wee one inside you.”

Oreo took this opportunity to prance into the Hall and James’ eyes grew wide in alarm. He slowly moved his hand to the hilt of his blade; Daniel reached for his arm and shook his head.

Sally and Sam turned as she came up to them. “Aha, here comes Oreo, even she knows you were a bad girl.” Sam said teasingly.

Lady Sally turned around and reached for Oreo’s big head and gave her a hug while fluffing up her fur. James mouth dropped in astonishment.

“How’s my big girl today? What are you up to my love, checking on me?” Lady Sally cooed at her and Oreo purred loudly rubbing herself against Sally’s legs.

James was mesmerized at the sight before him. A smile played across his face as he watched Sally and Oreo interact and exchange greetings. He looked at Daniel and questioned with his eyes.

“That’s Oreo,” Daniel explained with a smile, “she’s barely ten months old. She’s also enhanced; happened when Lady Sally and Rah bonded at the hatching. All our animals have been enhanced along with their masters.”

James turned and looked at Oreo again thinking about the animals back at his home base.

“This is amazing; my God she’s a beautiful beast! You say the riders and their pets are enhanced together? This is something we need to think about, we have many large hounds at base camp. Of course we do not have many riders left since the battle.” He saw the look on Daniel’s face and knew he would have to relate the tale of the last battle. He finished his tea and rose, “I say Daniel, may we go for a walk around your camp, I should love to see it all.”

Catching his drift quickly, Daniel got up and made a show of taking James and showing him the camp. As they left the Hall Kate watched and Daniel turned and raised his hand to halt her joining them. She knew he would inform her later as to what this was all about.

“James, have we offended you; I can tell by the look on your face that you’re upset. If I can help, just say the word.” Daniel wanted him to know that they were all brothers in this battle to reclaim their world. Daniel took him to his and Kate’s quarters. He invited him to sit in one of the large leather chairs and he stoked the fire in the fireplace. He got out a bottle of whiskey and poured him a shot. Then he sat and waited for James to begin his tale.

James took the shot glass and downed it quickly, taking a deep breath he began; “Ten months ago we thought we had the drop on the nasty bastards that had been hitting us for months. We had been playing cat and mouse with them for the better part of six months. We spotted their camp and decided to attack. I hadn’t wanted my mate, Catherine, to go with us; she had just found out she was pregnant, two months along. She insisted that she would be fine. She and her dragon, Lady Ursula, promised they would not engage in any fighting. We attacked their camp and destroyed it; it was almost too easy. The bastards had grown bold, and smart; they had another camp we knew nothing about and they attacked without warning, Valotin and I fought thru 20 of the beasts, but they were everywhere. I watched as my fellow riders were being pulled down and there was nothing I could do to help them. They fought to the very end, valiantly trying to turn the tide. As we came out of a band of them I turned to see my love, my Cath...” he stopped, his voice cracking.

“... my beautiful Catherine and her Lady Ursula surrounded. We tried to get to her, Oh God how we tried, but they kept blocking our way. We must have killed another 30 of them at least, but we couldn’t reach her in time. We watched in horror as she and Lady Ursula were overtaken and pulled down.”

He looked at Daniel with hollow eyes, and buried his head in his hands and wept. Daniel fixed him another drink and waited. After a bit he raised his head and looked at Daniel, “Valotin and I are empty shells, that’s why we volunteered for this job. We didn’t think we would be able to make it all the way here.”

Daniel leaned forward in his chair and laid his hand on James’ arm, “I am truly sorry, James. But you should know something about this mountain; healings take place here. Jake and the dragons have healed most of us. I’ve seen the spirit healed along with the body. That’s why we won against the bloody bastards; we are Light, they are darkness and chaos.”

James looked up at Daniel, "I'll agree with you on that, this is a very strange place. For one thing, your females ride the male dragons. Not so where I come from. Males ride the males, females the females. Peter says that it is decided by who makes contact with the Ancient first. He made contact with Alakar, and so it was ordained. And here also, for only a moment, I thought I felt ... something. When we were flying here with Lady Sally, Valotin said that for a moment there he thought he felt a familiar call, but he couldn't get a fix on it. Perhaps our pain makes us feel what we wish for." James took a deep breath and yawned, "sorry, but I am so weary, is there a place I might rest Daniel?"

"Yes, of course, I should have thought; please come with me James, I'll settle you into one the temporary caves. You'll be safe as the Dragons patrol the area. Oh, if you should wake and find some very large dogs at your bedside, don't be alarmed. They tend to visit newcomers and stay with them while they are sleeping. Just tell them to come get me when you wake up."

Daniel led James to a warm cave near the base of the mountain. After he was settled in he asked Andrew, thru Jake, to send Brutus and Cesar to stay with him the night. Then he bid him good night and went back to the Hall.

Kate was waiting for him, "So?" she asked him. Daniel related the story James had told him. "Oh Daniel, I knew I felt the sadness in him. We've got to do what we can for him while he is here. Perhaps Jake can help in his healing."

"Kate, don't interfere with this one. He's really hurting, and so is his dragon. Besides, I feel Jakes' hand in this somewhere." Kate gave him a kiss on the cheek and they left the Hall holding hands.

Later that night Kate spoke to Jake about James and Valotin. Jake told her not to bother herself, they had both been sent by Alakar for just this reason. Everything had been prepared and they would be healed at their own pace; "*these two have a special destiny,*" he told her.

James woke the next morning feeling rested and rather energized; as a matter of fact he hadn't felt this good in months. He remembered what Daniel had said about the camp; he liked the 'feel' of this camp, it was very positive. All the people were very friendly, and helpful, and the animals were a sight. There were two enormous huskies to greet him when he woke this morning. He spotted Lady Emily's falcon circling the camp and watched as he glided to a landing. Lady Emily came up behind him and answered his unspoken question.

"His name is Lancelot, he's a Peregrine falcon who has been enhanced; it quadrupled his size. He flies night patrol with the dragons every evening." She smiled sweetly at James.

"Oh my manners, excuse me, my name is Lady Emily." She held out her hand and he shook it smiling back at her, "Welcome to Dragons Hill stranger," she said sweetly, staring at the handsome stranger and blushing.

He smiled back at her and bowed in a chivalrous manner, "I am pleased to meet you Lady Emily, my name is James, rider of Valotin." His thick Scottish accent set her heart a twitter, "We come from across the sea."

Just then Daniel and Michael came around the bend and they took James off with them. They all headed for the mountaintop, Jake had need of James he was told. They entered the Riders Hall and James looked around the huge room; very impressed with the size of the place. He saw Jake and another man in the center of the room around a large granite table. He half-bowed in respect as they approached, Jake acknowledged him and Jeffery immediately started towards him.

"Ah, James, welcome, welcome my boy." Jeffery came forward and they shook hands, "my name is Jeffery; I am the advisor and chronicler for the Dragons of Light here at Dragons Hill. You might call me the dragons Resident Historian. I would like to get an idea of the landmass, and the positioning of your dragons and camp, and the black devils and their lair. I have some maps here, possibly you can help." He spread out a huge map of Europe across the tabletop.

James walked over and took a look at the maps of Scotland and England. Jeffery would keep him busy most of the day with the maps. He would have many, many questions to ask, just as Jake wanted. An hour passed quickly as Jeffery questioned him about the lay of the land.

Hours later Ichor and Lady Isabol entered the large Hall with Sarah and Jackson. Jake interrupted them for a moment and introduced them to James. James displayed his best dragon etiquette and told Ichor he considered it a great honor to meet the Second of the Ancients. He was very impressed with both Jackson and Sarah. He was told that they were to be the new family to start in Europe after they aided Alakar in ridding Scotland and England of the beasts.

James gave them detailed descriptions of their base camp and the strength of the beasts they fought. Tentative battle plans were drawn that would be put into play when they arrived. Sarah asked him to join them in a hunt the next day to see their squad in action. He was honored that they asked him and quickly said yes.

By dinnertime he was exhausted and ready for a break. Jackson offered him a ride to the mesa on Lady Isabol and he accepted. Sarah and Jackson and James met up with Michael and Sally and they all went down to the Hall for dinner together. The camaraderie among the riders was having a positive effect on James. He met several more riders, and during the meal he heard the tale of the final battle with the creatures.

He didn't believe the story of the talking dragons and the woman who thought she was a dragon. They just laughed and told him to just wait; John and Diana were due for a visit any day now. He would see, they told him; and then they all laughed. He was feeling lighter, more positive than he had in a very long time. He heard more tales about the area and the people in it. After a bit he excused himself for the night and left the Hall. He was in rather good spirits as he headed towards his quarters. A cool breeze came thru the camp and James decided to take a walk around.

Above dark eyes watched as he approached the waterfall area.

Now!

James was heading down towards the waterfall when he noticed a woman coming down the side of the mountain. Her hair caught his eye, red as a sunrise, it was flowing about her face in the wind; a beautiful freckle-faced redhead. He was taken aback by his reaction, caught completely off-guard. As she got closer she seemed familiar somehow. He stood to the side of a boulder and watched her. As she stepped off the landing he stepped forward. She tried to sidestep to keep from bumping into him but she lost her balance, James quickly reached out and steadied her by holding on to her arm.

"Easy there Miss, sorry if I spooked you," he said as he let her go and stepped back. She smiled and thanked him and then their eyes locked for a brief moment.

She blushed as she stared openly at him, "I know you, ...from somewhere..." She kept staring for about a minute as she tried to remember where she knew him. Suddenly recognition dawned on her and she backed-up shaking her head back and forth, then she turned and all but ran from him.

Well now, what was that all about? He thought as he made his way back to his cave.

James retired for the night quite exhausted. There were many questions floating around in his mind, but he was too tired to think about them anymore. He had many dreams, some of them painful, others hopeful; and the redheaded woman was there, coming his way. A week went by and James noted that he was feeling better and better each day, both physically and mentally. Then one morning he awoke refreshed and energized; a feeling of expectancy – that something was about to happen. He ran into Michael on his way up the mountain, he asked him about the woman he had seen.

"Can't help you too much my friend. I believe she's a new arrival, found an egg and was living in a cave by herself near the town we just recently freed. The doctor in the town knew of her, that's how we found out. Jake insisted that she be brought here to be properly instructed in the care of her egg. From what I understand it's huge; I mean the Queen said it was the biggest egg she's ever seen."

At the mention of that, James perked up. "A large egg you say? Where is the egg right now? Where are the hatching grounds located? Please, I have to see this egg."

"Sure, follow me, it's right up the mountain here." As they started to climb up the side, Michael began to relay the story of Oreo and the battle of the hatching grounds. As they arrived Oreo came out, and purred and rubbed against Michael. James was still quite impressed at her size and manner. She looked at James, and as if recognizing him, she purred loudly and rubbed against him also.

James went in with Michael and stood fixed. He recognized the size and shape of the egg; he was very familiar with eggs this size. He could feel the vibrations emanating from the egg.

Valotin, Valotin my friend. Are you there? Have you returned from feeding yet?

Your friend is still feeding, and resting James. Jake was speaking to him. Do not worry yourself about this egg. You should not be here; you should be off flying with Sarah and Jackson this morning. They are looking for you as we speak.

But Jake, this egg is...he tried to argue.

James, the matter of the egg is settled! Jake was rather stern with him. Be off!

Reluctantly James left the hatching grounds.

Something is going on; why isn't Valotin back from the feeding grounds? Jake was keeping them apart, but why?

He didn't feel that anything was wrong with Valotin, as a matter of fact he felt great. James decided to follow Jake's instructions and let the matter go. He went in search of Sarah and Jackson. Ichor located him for them and they met him on the path to the top. He decided to say nothing about what just happened. As they arrived up top, Jackson explained that since James' dragon was away at the feeding grounds for a well-deserved rest, they had asked Lady Ashley to ask permission for him to fly Daowyn. Daowyn said he would be honored to fly the rider who welded the Fire Staff. James decided to throw himself into the hunt. He graciously thanked Daowyn, and they all proceeded to leave for the Montana area.

We have gotten several reports of these guys heading for the area around Montana and Idaho border. They have to be hunted down and dealt with before they breed. Ichor acted as the relay point in the conversation between Jackson and James. Sarah and I thought that you would enjoy a good hunt. I realize that in your country it is a life or death situation; please believe me that we do not make light of your situation. It is only that here, these beasts are clowns. They have no fighting skills at all.

James quickly answered Jackson, if the one I killed yesterday is any indication of the dragons here, yes, they are quite inept. In the shire, a clever monster leads them. He strikes terror into the hearts of the people. We fight as best we can, but we were late to the game of dragon breeding; so our forces are small. But with you Ichor, and your lovely Lady Isabol, perhaps that will be changed.

James, see the river up ahead, Jackson pointed out, we will follow it. If they are near we will find them.

Sarah spoke up suddenly; I can feel people below Ichor! There are many of them, and they watch us in fear.

Let us go to the heights; we are too exposed this low. Ichor answered and flew to the heights with the others right behind him.

They flew for almost an hour before they spotted the monsters. There were four of them. Two were just juveniles, newly hatched by about a month. As they passed overhead they saw more join them. Now there were at least 8 of them.

Interesting development here! I believe that we are just in time. Apparently they have a hatching ground in the area and they are breeding again. Let's just see how many of them there are. They waited on high for about an hour as more and more of them showed up. They had quietly regrouped without Jake picking up on them. This could not be allowed to continue.

There are 3 of us, and 12 of them. I think we can take them with no problem. James, the Fire Staff you carry, how does it work? Jackson asked him.

It is a simple device that draws on the flame power of the dragon, James explained. Valotin and I both dreamt of it resting in the side of a mountaintop. We flew there and retrieved it. We have sent many of the devils to their doom together. Daowyn, do you know the figure eight maneuver?

Yes James, I know it well. I am honored we will flame together. Daowyn's voice betrayed his excitement of the impending battle. He who holds the Staff of Fire is a warrior of great fighting skills.

They waited till the sun was at its zenith and then they dove at the group. The poorly formed dragons never saw them coming until it was too late. Flames shot out in all directions. The smaller ones fell first, and the older ones tried to fight back. The larger and healthier dragons took them out quickly. Just as they thought that the battle was over, from out of the cave below came many more dragons.

They had been hiding, or breeding; it didn't matter as they soon were upon them. The monsters kept coming from the cavern below; they were beginning to think that they might be overrun. There were at least fifty of them by now, and these were seasoned fighters. This was taking on all the appearances of a real battle.

As they fought, James thought he saw some more dragons coming to their aid. Then he was surrounded and the Staff of Fire flamed again. Daowyn was a quick and mighty fighter and he soon learned the power of the Staff of Fire as he and James brought down many of the filthy beasts. It seemed that for every one they killed, another took its place. Sarah and Jackson were fierce in their attacks; they gave no quarter, and fought skillfully. James was starting to think that maybe they had stumbled upon another large force of blacks that had been kept hidden till they were up to fighting strength. The sheer numbers of these creatures was overwhelming them. James asked Ichor if perhaps they should call for aid.

Ichor informed him that the Blue Dragons from the coast had already been called. *Just be prepared for some very unusual dragons, they talk a lot.* Ichor informed him. Twenty minutes later, from below James heard the strangest thing.

“Coming thru dudes! Outta the way man!” A large Blue Dragon flew by James and flamed four of the black devils to dust as he passed. James stared open-mouthed at these strange dragons. He saw a very large Blue Dragon, with a mountain of a man riding him, take out six of the devils, and the man was singing loudly!

Thru Ichor, Jackson hailed James, *don't let them get you rattled James. They are very strange, but they are fierce fighters. Their leader is Wolf - Big John rides him, and Diana rides Surfman. Wait! Here they come from out of the sun. Are they not a sight?*

James watched as this golden goddess riding the back of a Blue Dragon swept by. He could have sworn that the dragon was yelling ‘surfs-up’, but he must have been mistaken. Then he saw them all come together in a tight formation and they all yelled, “hit it boys!” and they spiraled out and dove in a precision figure eight. The remaining black dragons fell as they were all flamed to ash.

The large Blue called Wolf flew by and went directly to Ichor. “Hail Ichor, Jackson, good to see you again! Lady Sarah we salute you! Who is your new friend who welds the Staff of Fire?”

James was stunned, he sat there mouth agape starring at Wolf. The Blue Dragon was speaking.... actually speaking! Jackson saw his dilemma and took pity on him. “Wolf, Big John, may I introduce James, he comes to us from across the sea. He and his dragon, Valotin, fight the devils in Scotland and England. His dragon is twice the size of Jake, if you can imagine that!”

“Hail James! You wield the Staff of Fire; a mighty warrior in your homeland you must be! We welcome you in the name of the Blue Dragon Clan.” Wolf roared the welcome call and his dragons joined in. James was overwhelmed, and honored.

Big John saw the look on his face and understood, “Yes James, they talk. I will explain when we land. May I introduce my lovely mate Diana, she rides Surfman.”

James bowed slightly as he sat on Daoywn. “Madame, I salute you and your brave dragon. You are both a beautiful sight to behold.”

Diana blushed bright red and Surfman said, “hey dude; we are the best! The fools don’t stand a chance.” They flew off ahead a bit.

“We were on our way to your camp when Ichor called to us. You know we can never pass up an opportunity to flame a couple of more of these clowns. Diana is in need of the women’s advice on something. She won’t tell me what it’s about, just insisted that we go to Dragons Hill.”

Wolf cut in, “she is with child I tell you! I can feel the change. Should I not know if my sister is with child! She has all the classic signs; she is haughty, she wants to form a nesting area, and she wants us to leave her alone. Classic dragon signs of pregnancy.”

Big John asked Ichor to call ahead and ask when the doctor was due to return for a check-up on the women. He was informed that the doctor was due in two days time. It would be perfect timing. Daniel and Lady Kate sent word that Big John and Diana would stay in a newly made guest cave near theirs. She and Daniel also sent word to John that they were aware of Diana’s condition and very happy for him. Coming from them, the news finally penetrated his thick skull, and he realized fully that he was going to be a father. This huge man, who was afraid of nothing, sat there on Wolf, with a silly smile on his face as tears were running down his cheeks.

“John? John, are you alright man?” Jackson was concerned at this change in his friend.

“He’s alright Jackson,” James told him. He knew only too well what John was feeling. “It just hit him, the reality of the situation.”

Ichor sensed what James was feeling and began to understand. He had been brought here for healing and much more. He liked the man from afar, and wanted to give him hope.

As they came over the rise and headed towards Dragon’s Hill, Ichor spoke to James. *I am sorry for your loss James, but life will go on. And you must prepare yourself for it, just as your dragon is doing, so must you. Do not close off your heart to the possibility of a future life.*

I appreciate your concern Ichor, it has been ten months, but it still hurts sometimes like it was only yesterday. James assured him, Valotin and I are getting by ok.

As they landed Jake called Ichor and Wolf to the Riders Hall. Jackson and Sarah went with them. James was left with Big John and Diana and they started down the mountain. Daniel met them coming down, “hey guys, we’re planning a trip to town. The women want to shop, and Doc is due for a visit in two days. Want to come along?”

“Oh yes! John of my heart, please can we go? It is so much fun to shop!” Diana had learned much during her visits and shopping with the women was her favorite. “Kate will be there, and Lady Ashley, Daniel?”

“Yes Diana, all the women are going. The house will be filled with noise, and music, and all the things that you love,” Daniel smiled as he told her. He always enjoyed her enthusiasm, her sweet innocence and delight at the small things in life. “And James, you’re coming along to ride shotgun for the duration. No arguments, Jake said that you needed to unwind; and I was told to tell you that Valotin would not be returning for another week; so no arguments!”

Elizabeth was sitting quietly in the hatching grounds enjoying the time spent with her dragon. She was a chatty little thing, and she had a real spirited personality. She was getting so big, Elizabeth was so proud of her. As she sat there her thoughts wandered to other things. She really liked Dragons Hill, and the people here also; they were all quite friendly, people of good heart. Her thoughts now took on the form of James, with his incredibly blue eyes. He was new in camp; she couldn’t remember seeing him before. He was so handsome, and so real! My God, the things she had dreamt about him were enough to make her blush all over again.

What a surprise. I didn’t think I could feel like that again.

Elizabeth, Jake called to her, Elizabeth, Lady Kate is in need of your services. Will you please go to her; she is in the Mess Hall, she has a chore for you.

Sure Jake, I’ll go right now.

She really liked Jake, he felt safe; she trusted him with her life. And she was in awe of Kate and the legend of all she had done. She brushed off the sand of the hatching ground from her clothes and wished she had some new ones. These were just about worn out. She hated to show up looking like a rumpled disorganized mess. She felt she owed it out of respect for Lady Kate to appear well groomed. She walked into the Hall and spotted Kate amid all the obviously pregnant women. They were all chatting up a storm about a coming trip of some kind.

“Oh I saw the cutest crib set...”

“I saw a rocker I want to get and also a...”

“I want to have plenty of baby clothes...”

“I’m going to get some clothes for after...”

She heard snippets of conversations as she passed thru the throng of women. They all sounded very excited. She finally caught Kate’s eye and headed over to her. “Lady Kate, excuse my interruption, but Jake said you had need of my services. What may I do for you?” she asked.

“Ah Elizabeth; we are going shopping, and you are coming along. I know that you need quite a lot of things. You have been here long enough and not even mentioned it. You know I will not take ‘no’ as an answer; we are going to town for a few days. Jake says your egg is in a dormant transition stage and will be doing nothing for a week or more. You can still keep in contact with each other.

You are going to enjoy yourself for a few days young woman, do you hear?” She was smiling at her so sweetly that she couldn’t refuse her.

“Yes Lady Kate, I hear you. I will enjoy going shopping I can tell you.” She was really looking forward to it. “Everything I have is worn out. Thank you for thinking of me.”

Daniel came into the Hall and went to Kate’s side. “When do you want to leave my love? I have sent Andrew ahead to open the house and air it out. The town has weathered the winter very well. He saw nothing lurking about. Brutus and Cesar are running around with Tabs; they flushed out a couple of rabbits, but that was all.”

“Ladies! Ladies, your attention please,” Kate announced, “when can you all be ready? I’d like us to be there this afternoon so we can get some food in the house.”

“We can all be ready in an hour Kate.” Lady Sally spoke up. “Michael is going to be busy with patrols, so I can leave anytime.”

“Same goes for me,” Lady Ashley added.

“Include me in this too,” Lady Beth chimed in with enthusiasm.

“And I too am happy to go with you all,” Diana shouted as she entered the Hall. The ladies all went to her and hugged her in welcome, and immediately started discussing the symptoms of their impending pregnancies.

“Ok Ladies, gather around.” Daniel was enjoying his role in this little game of matchmaking that Jake and Alakar had cooked up. “First off, let me introduce you all to James, he comes from Scotland. He is here for a visit and I’ve asked him to accompany us and ride shotgun. He has graciously accepted. I don’t know of a man who would turn down an offer to be in the company of so many lovely ladies.”

There was a lot of ‘hellos’, and ‘welcomes’ directed to James. He smiled charmingly, and noticed that the redhead was there also. Maybe she was going along on the trip.

“Ok ladies, we will be taking the trailer there, I want you all safe and not jostled around. Get your things, one bag, and be ready on top in an hour. See you all there.” Daniel went to Kate smiling; he bent over and kissed her on the cheek.

Sam came up to them, “Since my Lucy is going along on this junket, I’m going with you too! I can lay in some food for the camp and return with the dragons.”

Daniel was still amazed that Lucy was pregnant; the power of the dragons seemed to be limitless. Since learning she was carrying twins, he took great care to check on her every now and then. He began to notice that she seemed to be looking younger and younger each week. The Dragons didn’t take to giving her the gift lightly; they went all out stopping just short of actual enhancement. Even Sam was looking younger, and Daniel doubted that either of them noticed the change at all. “We’d love to have you along Sam. Have you met James yet? He’s newly arrived from Scotland.”

James and Sam shook hands. James asked him if he rode a dragon and was surprised when Sam burst out loud laughing. “Not in this lifetime my man, no, I’m the glorified cook of this band of dragon riders!”

“James, we’ll need to get you some clothes and anything else you want while we’re at the town.” Daniel explained, “Michael and Andrew will show you how it works. But you have to be careful; it sort of grows on you quickly!”

Daniel was going to throw him off so he wouldn’t be expecting anything. Kate would do the same with Elizabeth. Jake said these two were destined to be together, and if he and Kate were any indication of his abilities, then James and Elizabeth would find each other.

“Daowyn said he enjoyed your riding him, and he consented to joining us on our trip. Your dragon must have been exhausted. A flight of that magnitude is unheard of, let alone done.” Daniel continued, “Lady Diana and her dragon Surfman have ridden the thermals around the world, but that’s like coasting on a wave. It’s nothing at all like having to actually fly the distance. When we are settled at the house you must tell us what it is like overseas. We have been curious as to the situation there, how they got started, who the leaders are, and so on. There is nothing like sitting outside with a beer in hand, smoking a good cigar, or pipe chatting with the guys.”

“I look forward to it Daniel, I have some questions myself. I’m going to my quarters to get my bag. I’ll meet you all on top.” James took off and went to his quarters and rolled up his gear and put it in his bag. *Maybe this would be a good thing.*

Everyone was on top and loading the trailer when James stepped out onto the mesa. He marveled at the trailer and the ingenuity of the men to put a T-bar on the top for the dragons to grab hold of when moving it about. He tossed his bag into the trailer, and helped the ladies climb aboard and get seated.

“Oh no, I forgot my knitting bag! Oh damn! Elizabeth, would you be a dear and run down to my quarters and get my knitting bag? Please?” Lady Kate asked sweetly. Elizabeth shook her head and was off down the pathway.

It is time we are off. Please close the trailer and let us be on our way. Jake made a low pass.

But Jake, Lady Kate just sent Elizabeth to get her knitting bag for her. She hasn’t returned to the mesa yet. Daniel informed Jake.

James, will you wait for her. She can ride with you on Daowyn; he knows the way. Just follow us, and tell her I wanted to get the ladies to town early enough in the afternoon for them to get settled. James nodded, *Thank you James.* Jake circled around and picked up the trailer and they were off.

James marveled at the inventiveness of these people. *These are an amazing group of people, and most amazing dragon leader this Jake.* He went over to Daowyn and bowed before him, and then went around and climbed on. He heard a fluttering sound behind him and turned to see Lancelot take flight. He was following Lady Emily to the town; he was so graceful, so beautiful. James watched as they all flew off towards the west. *What an amazing sight!* He was lost in thought for some time. He turned as he heard Elizabeth come onto the mesa. She looked bewildered for a moment.

“Jake didn’t want to wait any longer. They just left about ten minutes ago. He asked me to give you a ride to the town. I’m James, please...” he stretched out his hand as he leaned down and offered her a hand up. She took the strap of the knitting kit and slipped it over her head. She took his hand and pulled herself up and slid in behind him.

She then wrapped her arms around his midriff and pulled her self to him as he took off. He was surprised at his own reaction to her touch.

I'm not dead after all, he thought to himself and smiled.

As they rode she leaned against him and he could feel the heat of her body. It was not all that unpleasant. As they flew along he took in the countryside. Looking below he saw a lonely black straggler gliding along; he felt a cold chill go up his back. James called to Jake and told him what he saw. Jake relayed to Daowyn and set up a relay between him and James.

Daowyn called to James; *James, shall we rid the world of this abomination? Let us make quick work of him. Best warn Lady Elizabeth of our intentions.*

James turned around and pulled Elizabeth to him and yelled in her ear, "Lady Elizabeth, please hold on." Pointing downward he told her, "We have some business below." Elizabeth looked below and her eyes flew wide as she grinned at him.

James pulled out the Staff of Fire and yelled over his shoulder, "Hold tightly my lady." Daowyn dove at the creature before it even knew that it was in danger. He flamed it as he passed and immediately turned around and James sent it to its doom. Daowyn flamed the carcass to ash quickly. They soon proceeded on their way.

"My God that was exciting!" Elizabeth was panting heavily, her eyes wide with excitement. "You showed no fear at all, you just dived in; I would have been shaking in my boots. It was amazing to see!" Elizabeth was so excited, she was babbling.

"Calm yourself my lady, it is over. You're safe, we can proceed again." He found he was enjoying her enthusiasm, her presence was somehow familiar, even comforting. He had not had thoughts of another woman in a very long time.

"Proceed! No, no! We should see if there are any more of them lying about. If there's one, surely there are others. We can't take the chance if ..." she was hoping for another fight.

He started to laugh heartily, "I do believe that you are looking forward to a fight. Well now, I never would have guessed it; you are a fighter, Lady Elizabeth!" Turning, he mockingly bowed at her smiling. She thought he was making fun of her and she swatted him up aside his head. "Hey! What was that for?"

"Don't ever make fun of me! I will be a warrior one day, my dragon told me so. I am not some stupid, weak woman; I will never be that again. I am more, much more." She spoke with such conviction and fierceness that he was surprised.

"I was not mocking you. I appreciate your eagerness to want to fight. But your dragon will not be like these dragons. It is, or will be larger, much larger. When my Valotin returns, you will see what size your dragon will become. You are not destined for here; you will be returning with me, and Ichor's squad of dragons. Your dragon will tell you the truth of this, just ask her."

Elizabeth said nothing more, but she was surprised that James knew what she had just found out that morning from her dragon. She would indeed be leaving this country and going overseas. She had told no one of this yet.

So how did this James know?

We have arrived Master James, Daowyn announced. Her spirit is strong, but it is as damaged as yours. You should heal each other; it would make you both stronger. James thanked Daowyn for his concern but assured him that he was just fine. He received a low rumbling chuckle in reply.

James watched as they glided over the last hill and the house and estate came into view. The beauty of the place took them both by surprise. As they landed Tabs, Brutus and Cesar came out to greet them. The woman slid off of Daowyn's back and bent down to pet the dogs. They greeted her like an old friend, licking her face and knocking her over. He watched as she giggled and begged them to stop. He slid off and thanked Daowyn for the ride and headed for the house.

Elizabeth shooed the dogs off and went to Daowyn, *thank you so much for the ride mighty Daowyn, I enjoyed it very much.* He showed surprise and then bowed his enormous head to her, and then he turned and took off to join the other dragons. Elizabeth ran and joined up with James quickly. They followed the dogs around the side of the house towards the back where all the noise was coming from.

"This is a beautiful place, I love the porch." Elizabeth commented as her eyes looked over the house.

"Thank you, I love it too," Daniel had stepped out to greet them. "It has a comfy feel to it don't ya think? Well, I see you both made it in one piece." Waving his hand he bid them enter at their own risk.

They went up the back steps and entered thru the kitchen. It was full of people all talking at the same time. The women were busy chopping up some food, and making some kind of dip and chatting about all kinds of things. Cokes were being passed around. Elizabeth took one and swallowed half of it right away, letting out a loud belch after. She turned beet red amid loud cheers of 'well done!'

Daniel took James off and led him upstairs to his old room. "This will be your room while you're here. Just drop your stuff off you can unpack later. Right now we men are off to the back yard and some well deserved beer. Come on, follow me."

He headed off down the stairs with James following. They waded their way thru the women and headed out the back door. James could see Michael and Andrew tossing a football back and forth. Jackson, Jason, and Steve were getting some beers out of the cooler. They tossed one to Daniel and one to James.

"Bloody good!" James exclaimed as he opened it up and drank down the whole bottle in one long gulp. A very loud belch broke the silence and they all laughed. "It's been a long time since I had one of those."

"There's more where that came from, indulge yourself tonight, James" Daniel told him. "We rarely get to enjoy like this; so we make it count."

"Oh, before I forget, we ran into a lowly straggler on the way here." James was directing his comments to Daniel. "Daowyn and I took care of it; we felt nothing else around. It was very young Daniel; there may be a hatching ground nearby."

Daniel put his mind at ease quickly, "Juztin and Lady Jessica are scouting the area as we speak. We will check it out in the morning at great length. Tonight we party James."

Daniel threw him another beer, “the dragons will keep watch, and the dogs will keep anything on the ground at bay. This night is ours to enjoy.”

Jackson came around the side of the house with a bag of charcoal, “Ok let’s get this fire started; I want to eat before midnight.” They all went over to him and offered advice on how to start the fire, how much charcoal to use, and how hot to let it get.

Kate watched them from the screened in porch. It almost seemed normal again; it was a heart warming moment in a world with very few of them lately. She turned around and went into the house. Music was playing, Big John was teaching Diana to dance, and the women were all talking at once with each other. For a moment everything froze and Kate looked about remembering.

Can it be that almost a year ago I stood here on this very spot and thought about this moment? Having the house full of people, laughing and enjoying themselves; me standing here preparing snacks and enjoying the chatter. So much has happened, a new life in me for this new world of ours. Thank you Lord, for all these precious moments, but most of all, thank-you for Daniel.
Noise broke thru her thoughts and she smiled.

“Hey there woman, come and dance with me, lets show them how it’s done!” Big John had come in the kitchen and grabbed her up. “We used to be the champions.” He swung her out on the living room floor and they began to twirl and dance around in rhythm to the music. Even with her big belly, Kate was beautiful to behold. Everyone was chanting, and Daniel came in to see what was going on. He watched for a few moments soaking in the sight of her enjoying herself.

“Hey, that’s my woman you big lug!” Daniel turned and grabbed Diana and dragged her forward, and actually got her to dance with him amid giggles and laughter. She was enjoying herself immensely. Big John was surprised that she caught on so fast, and then he switched partners with Daniel in mid step. He grabbed her in his large hands and swung her around in the air, and she laughed and looked at him with such devotion and love that it was plainly evident to everyone in the room. As the song ended, everyone was clapping.

“Oh, I’ve got to sit down for a minute Daniel. I’m not used to all that spinning around.” Daniel apologized to Kate, but she told him not to worry, it was fun. She sent him back outside, and the house sort of divided up into women inside, men outside. They got the fire going strong and then talk came around to, ‘what the hell they were doing!’

“I sometimes feel like I don’t know what’s coming next. And then other days I know clearly what our goal is in all this.” Daniel looked at Jackson, and James, “you know what I mean? It’s a whole new world out there. Are we going to be able to handle it? Is there really a plan in place, does Jake really know where all this is heading?” He looked about at all these brave men and many were nodding in agreement.

“I know exactly what you’re saying, Daniel” Jackson admitted, “I’ve thought the same things in my own mind. Ichor is so damned sure of everything. Says we will be fine, one hatching will change the day and we will be victorious.” He took a long swig and continued, “I never thought of myself as a leader, but Ichor says that I am perfect. I have the strong resolve and calmness that is needed. What the hell does he see that I don’t? And Sarah, God bless her; she is a leader in every sense of the word.” All agreed with him on that.

James spoke up, "I just trust the knowledge of the dragons. I follow their lead; it's never let me down." He looked at them all, "Cheers my friends!" He downed his beer, and they all followed.

Inside the house Kate sought out Elizabeth. She found her on the front porch sitting with the dogs. "Oh no you don't; come inside and join the party. I will not take no for an answer, come, I insist!" Kate's enjoyment was infectious; Elizabeth followed her inside and was soon embroiled in a conversation with the other women. Before she realized it, she was enjoying herself again. It had been so long since she allowed herself to enjoy anything. Each and every one of these people was like family to her, and it was good to have that feeling again.

The men set up a huge table outside, and now all the women were out there with plates, silverware, napkins, condiments, etc. Huge steaming bowls of corn on the cob were placed on the large table along with baked beans, and platters of baked potatoes. It certainly was going to be a feast. The meat was ready in no time and they all sat down for a sumptuous feast. Before the meal they all joined hands as Daniel led the prayer.

"Thank you Lord for this wonderful feast, and for our family. Thank you for the Dragons. Thank you for all the blessings you shower on us. Thank you for our friends and soon to be new colleagues across the sea. And most of all, thank you for the new life you have blessed us all with; we are truly, humbly grateful. Ok everyone – dig in!" Plates of food were soon passed around the table.

Kate saw to it that James and Elizabeth sat across from each other. Several times she caught James studying Elizabeth, and vice versa. *This is going to be fun*, she thought to herself. *Bringing them together would be a challenge, not as difficult as she and Daniel, but still a challenge. Jake always knows what needs to be done.*

After dinner the women cleaned up quickly and they all decided a walk was called for on this beautiful evening. Daniel asked James and Elizabeth to take the point position with all the dogs as their lead. James felt that he was being manipulated, but he didn't object. As they walked along he asked Elizabeth how she found her dragon egg. She asked him if he really wanted to hear the story, or was he just making polite conversation. He told her no, he was interested; he always found each tale to be significant.

"Willpower can accomplish many things," she began. "Those vile black bastards destroyed my world; one of them killed my husband and my daughter before my eyes. Why it didn't kill me I'll never know. In my rage and grief I vowed I would kill the thing; so I followed it. I must have been out of my mind. I tracked it for months, the filthy thing. At the time I didn't care how long it took me, I was determined that I would kill it." She dabbed at the tears that came at the remembrances of that horrible day. "It led me right to a hatching ground; and I can tell you that I have never been so scared in all my life. It was like all the insane rage that had fueled me for so long had suddenly disappeared; and it was replaced with clarity and sanity. What was I thinking I asked myself? My God there were two of them inside the grounds. I turned to run and slipped and fell in some awful foul smelling liquid; it was dragon pee, and it saved my life. They would have surely smelled me because I was so close I could have touched them. A piece of shell hid me from their eyes. After what seemed like hours they left the grounds. I had turned to leave and stumbled when I heard her for the first time. You know the routine; this little baby voice asking 'Hello? Is someone there?' I'm sure you can guess the rest."

"Yes, you are so happy that you want to shout it to the hilltop. Then you can't believe what you're doing. And then, you're so afraid that someone will find out, you go to extremes to hide it." He was remembering his own experience.

“Yes! I was afraid that the people in the town would try to destroy her, so I hid out in a cave to keep her safe. The doctor found me out there one day, but he promised he wouldn’t tell them. Eventually Dragons Hill made contact with the town and with Doc, and after a bit he told them about me, and my egg. Of course I was sent for immediately. Seeing all of them with their riders filled me with hope again. They were so magnificent to watch, so graceful in the air.

When they took me to meet Jake I was awe struck. First thing Jake said to me was that my egg would not hatch until I healed. He told me that I had sealed off my heart, and that it must heal too.” She let out a sigh, “that brings us up to here and now; kind of boring, huh?”

He stopped walking and turned to her. “No, not boring. I’ve been there, and healing takes a long, long time. I lost my mate and her dragon 10 months ago. There are some days when I don’t think of her at all, and some days when everything reminds me of her. And then there are some days when I wish I just had someone to hold, who understood the need. Someone to lie next to and hold at night when I feel so alone.”

She looked up at him and saw the same pain she felt reflected in his eyes.

“I know what you mean,” she said as she laid her hand on his chest, “sometimes all I want is someone to hold me during the night; a warm body next to mine. Is that so bad a thing to want?”

“No, no, it isn’t.” James looked into her eyes and for a moment felt himself swept away. “Perhaps... we could help each other.” He looked down at her and thought that maybe this woman who understood the pain so well, maybe she could help. “I’m sorry; I don’t mean to be so bold ...”

She put her hand on his arm, “No, no you didn’t offend me. And given the gaiety of the night, I accept your offer. We both know when they all go to bed we will be left with our thoughts. And this type of night brings back many memories; I really don’t want to face them alone tonight.”

She stood there searching his face for his thoughts.

He smiled down at her as he caressed her cheek with the back of his hand. He bent and lightly kissed her cheek, taking in the smell of her. Her sharp intake of breath told him that she was taken by surprise, but she smiled at him shyly as she blushed. He suddenly saw that the others were catching up to them, so they continued on quickly.

“Daniel, did you see that? Were they kissing just now? Oh this is so exciting!” Kate was enjoying her job as matchmaker.

“Kate, give them a breather. You’ve been hovering over them like a mother hen. Listen to Jake.” She smiled mischievously at him. “They will take all the right steps. All we have to do is give them the time and the opportunity.” Daniel looked at her as sternly as he could; she was impossible. He took her in his arms carefully and kissed her. “I love you woman, but sometimes you drive me crazy!”

“Oh hush,” she told him seductively, “come kiss me again my Viking warrior!” He obeyed gladly, and soon they heard giggles behind them as the others caught up to them.

As everyone returned to the house music once again filled the night. Little groups formed around the house and conversations were varied. James was asked what their quarters were like, and if they had mountains like Dragons Hill. He explained that they had a castle built into the side of a mountain. This seemed to impress everyone.

Elizabeth helped Kate clean up the kitchen, and went around picking up all the excess glasses around the house. Music was soon filtering out into the kitchen and Elizabeth found herself singing along with some of them. Janis Joplin came on and 'Me & Bobby McGee' started. It had been awhile, but it was a favorite of hers. She went outside and was scouring down the B-B-Q grill, and she was pretty sure that they wouldn't hear her inside. So she belted out the song with everything she had. As the song ended she stood and turned around - to a crowd of people. They all burst out with applause and shouts of 'bravo!' She turned beet red, and dropped her scouring pad, and stood with her mouth open.

"Janis couldn't have done it any better," Steve shouted as he clapped loudly, "bravo lady, bravo!"

"You guys could have warned me! Oh, I'm so embarrassed!" She was still blushing, and James found it rather fetching. She saw him looking at her and she rolled her eyes and laughed.

In that moment, as he watched her laughing, the wind gently blowing her hair around her face, James felt himself suddenly come to life. He was unprepared for the effect she had on him. He slowly backed up, and went inside. Well this is an unexpected reaction; he had to get himself under control. *My God! Who is this woman and why does she have such an effect on me? She rides my mind with thoughts I haven't had in a very long time. And I must admit that I rather enjoy them.* He got himself under control and went to the cooler and got two cokes. He went outside smiling broadly and gave one to her. "Cheers!" he shouted and bowed to her with a flourish. She plopped down on the grass holding her sides laughing. Everyone came out and joined her in the grass and the conversations started.

"Remember the time Steve and Lady Elzbeth tripped over a heard of rampaging sheep..."

"How about when you fell into a pile of cow shit over the field in..."

"And remember when the twins went to chase Oreo, and she ended up chasing them!"

The next couple of hours were spent reminiscing about the 'good ole times' along with lots of laughter. Some of the stories were hilarious, especially the ones about the Blue dragons; some were so silly they were all laughing hysterically before the end could be told. It was an enjoyable time for all. Gradually, two by two they started to call it a night. Couples said their goodnights and headed off to bed. Kate and Daniel were the last to go up the stairs. Elizabeth went around and picked up all the empty beer cans and glasses. She came back in the house to find him standing there, waiting for her.

He held out his hand, "Madame, it is time to turn in; leave the rest till morning."

She put everything down and dried her hands. Then she took his hand and allowed him to lead her up the stairs. She grabbed her backpack as they went down the hall to his room. He closed the door behind them and turned the lock.

"There's a shower in there if you like, please make yourself comfortable." He wanted to put her at ease.

She went into the bathroom and took a shower. She was wondering if what she was doing was right. When it came right down to it, she didn't care anymore. She just didn't want to be alone this night. She stepped out of the shower and dried herself off. She brushed her teeth, and then began to work on her hair. She opened the door and moved to the bedside as she began drying her hair.

"Your turn, it will take awhile to towel-dry my hair. A blow dryer will wake the house."

He smiled at her and her consideration of the others. He went in and took his own shower, dried himself off and put on a tee shirt and a pair of boxers. As he emerged from the bathroom he found her sitting on the side of the bed. She had her head turned to the side as she was rubbing her hair with the towel. That small act so affected him that he quickly turned around.

Get yourself under control, old boy!

"Do you mind sleeping with the window opened?" he asked walking to the window and opening it.

"I rather prefer it; I like the sounds of the night." She stood up and bent over and gave her hair one last big rubbing, and then stood up swinging her hair back. She turned and faced him smiling.

"That's as good as it gets right now!"

Her red hair was stunning, framing her face in such a way that he was affected deeply.

"It's beautiful, you're beautiful," he told her in a deep voice facing the window, he couldn't turn around just yet. She must have guessed, because she came up behind him and slid her arms thru his and around his waist.

"It's ok James; sometimes the need is stronger than the will." She told him in a soft voice, "I'm not offended at all."

He turned around; she was so refreshing, her freckles and red hair were very appealing to him, very charming. He touched her face gently rubbing the side of her cheek. She closed her eyes and tilted her head, enjoying the feeling. He pulled her to him gently and he kissed her on the forehead, on her cheeks, and finally full, on her lips. He pulled back and looked into her eyes. *Is that fear I'm seeing?* He quickly let her go.

"I'm sorry; you have an effect on me I haven't felt for a very long time. Don't worry, I won't force myself on you. We'll sleep together, as I promised, and take comfort in each other's arms this night." He climbed into bed and threw back the covers. She climbed in and snuggled up to him. He put his arm around her as she laid her head on his chest.

"Thank you James," she said it so softly he almost missed it.

They cuddled together saying nothing. Each one was just enjoying the feeling of warm companionship. Finally they let go and relaxed, allowing sleep to overtake them. Dreams filtered through their subconscious during the night; very special dreams.

Out side, a dragon could be heard keening in a deep throaty voice.

The next morning James woke up curled around her. It was a good feeling; the smell of her was comforting. She was quite a woman, a good woman he was sure. She awoke and seductively stretched; unaware of the effect she had on him. She turned towards him with a big smile on her face. "Good morning James." Not at all shy, she slowly began to run her hand over his chest and down to his belly.

Surprised he felt himself rising to the situation, and he grabbed her hand, "Stop! Please, it would not be wise."

"I wouldn't mind at all James, I find myself wanting to feel again. Your attentions would be welcome." She cuddled up next to him and he began to think maybe it would be a good idea after all. Suddenly there was a knock on the door and they both jumped.

Daniel's voice could be heard thru the door shouting at them, "hey you two lazybones, time to get up! We've got things to do today. Come on!"

"We'll be right down," he yelled thru the door to Daniel.

She giggled as they got up and she dragged him into the shower with her. This led to a lot of soapy horseplay, as she wasn't the least bit shy about her body. She had a beautiful body, and he found himself enjoying their time together. He wanted to spend more time with her, talk with her more. For the first time in a long time he was entertaining thoughts of making love; making love to her. She was so different from any woman he had ever known. She started pushing him to hurry up, they had to go, people were waiting. When they finally came downstairs they were the only ones in the house. Everyone had already left for the warehouse. They ran outside and around the house to the front, laughing at each other. There stood Daniel and Queenie. James immediately pulled Elizabeth back; they both bowed to her.

Daniel was trying his best not to laugh. "Lady Elizabeth, you are needed at the warehouse. Just follow the road up there," he said pointing the way, "it will take you to it. Lady Kate is waiting for you, James and I have other duties today."

"Yes, of course Daniel." She looked at James and smiled, tilting her head she shrugged her shoulders and turned and ran up the hill towards the warehouse.

"Now James, you and I have a date with Jake." Daniel climbed on Queenie and they were soon in the air. She flew over the warehouse and he could see Elizabeth climbing the stairs to the doorway. As they flew off towards the mountain, he felt emptiness build inside of him. Queenie flew directly to the Riders Hall. Daniel and James dismounted and went inside.

Jeffery and Jake were waiting for them. Jake turned and lowered his head to James and looked at him for a time. *Very good James, you have done well. Daniel my friend, I thank you for bringing James to us. You may return to Lady Kate if you wish, James will be here with us for most of the day. I will call you when we are finished.*

Daniel bid them all good day and he and Queenie were off. The plan was to keep them both apart for the entire day. *'Absence makes the heart grow fonder' isn't that the saying?* Daniel chuckled to himself as he and Queenie returned to the town.

Up above James was wondering what this was all about. Jeffery came over to him and began a long dissertation on Dragon History. He filled him in on a lot of things that he did not know. He was wondering where all this was leading when Jeffery asked him what he knew of Dragon Prophecy. He admitted that the only prophecy he knew of was the Legend of the White.

Jake now took over the conversation. *James my friend, there is also the Prophecy of the Phoenix. 'From the ashes of a tormented soul will rise again the Fourth of the Ancients.'* He waited for this information to take effect. *When you arrived at our camp, it was obvious that you and Valotin were both in great pain. You were managing to slowly heal yourself. Difficult though it was for you, you tried to hide your pain. But your dragon knew, for he was suffering greatly also. He did not want you to know how difficult each day was for him, so he also hid his pain from you. That was why Alakar sent you both to us. He feared that he would lose you both before the prophecy could be fulfilled. I know that you have been upset that you cannot contact Valotin. I have heard you call out to him several times. James, your dragon is well, and he is almost completely healed. He will be returning to you very soon.*

Jake rose up to his full height, reared back his head and roared, he then lowered his head right in front of James. *Hear me now James, Holder of the Staff of Fire. Valotin shall return as the Fourth of the Ancients. You and Valotin are to be the leaders of a new family of Dragons of Light! Yes James, you! And Lady Elizabeth is to be your mate. Her egg is a Queen Dragon, and Valotin's mate!* James' eyes flew wide and stared at Jake open-mouthed in stunned incredulity. Jake continued explaining. *But, before any of this takes place, Elizabeth must heal, and only you can do that for her. You began last night. She is very strong willed, a fierce warrior she will be; but she is also a very fragile woman. She felt grateful to you for being so kind to her last night. This morning when you left with Daniel, she felt empty inside as she watched you go. She asked immediately where you were going. She wishes to be with you again. This is a major breakthrough for her. Once you become one with her, her dragon will hatch, and Valotin will return.*

Slow down Jake, my word this is too much! Me? I cannot see myself as a leader. James was overwhelmed with this information; he was trying to disseminate it properly. *I'm always thinking too much about the consequences of any actions. Peter is a real leader, he and Alakar are bloody great!*

Jake reared his head back and chuckled, then came forward. *That's exactly what he said of you James. Your forward thinking is what is needed to fight the dragons of Europe. And you shall be victorious against them James, I have seen it already. The way you have adjusted and dealt with your grief and your pain has marked you as a leader. Your gentleness with Lady Elizabeth, thinking of her need over your own, this marked you as a man of great compassion. A leader needs all these qualities. You have shown great leadership in many areas James. Your dragon has great confidence in you. He has been in contact with his Queen in her egg. He has healed his spirit and soul. Now you must also heal yours.*

James remembered Elizabeth curled up next to him when he woke. He saw her face before him, and remembered how it felt when he kissed her.

About Elizabeth Jake, yes, I am attracted in her. She is so different from any woman I have ever known. And yes, she stirs in me feelings I thought were long dead. But I wouldn't know how to begin to break thru that wall she has around herself.

Jake chuckled:

That is being done now. We are keeping you both apart till tomorrow evening. She will search for you, and hopefully, open herself up to the possibility of having feelings for you. My Lady Kate tells me she is much agitated that Daniel took you off. So it is already progressing, as it should. Now, to you...there is much we must go over and much we must do to prepare you for what is to come. Come with me.

James spent the rest of the day and half the night with Jake. They went from dragon to dragon and knowledge was passed along. He flew to the high mesa and met with the Blue Dragons and learned even more. Jake kept him very busy. Knowledge was the key to winning, and James was filled with it. When he returned he was a changed man. He had been rejuvenated and slightly enhanced. His features were honed to perfection. He had a new sense of purpose in his life. He loved Catherine and always would; but it was time to put her to rest and get on with his life. He looked forward to seeing Elizabeth the next day. He slept very well that night.

Elizabeth on the other hand was restless during the night. She couldn't believe that he had left her. She really thought that he cared something for her; that he would be returning in the evening. She should have known better. She had allowed herself to feel something for this man, and he taken what he could and split. She finally got up and went downstairs. She was pacing the floor in the living room when Daniel came downstairs.

“Oh! Didn't know anyone was there. I'm thirsty, want something?” Daniel came closer peering at her. “Ah, Elizabeth, great timing. I have a message for you from James. You were already upstairs when I returned last night. Didn't want to wake you.”

He got down a glass and poured himself some water. Then he yawned loudly as Elizabeth was hanging on his every word.

“Excuse me there, oh, where was I? Ah yes, Jake is holding him up at the Riders Hall. It has to do with some information from overseas, dragon business. Anyway James asked me to tell you that he will be back as soon as possible. He asks you to please forgive him, and don't leave, wait for his return.” He drank down the glass of water.

Elizabeth ran up to him and gave him a big hug all the while saying, “Oh thank you Daniel, thank you so much!” Then she was off, flying up the stairs two at a time, humming to herself.

Daniel chuckled to himself. *Are you happy now Jake? She seemed thrilled at the news. Now can I go back to sleep?* Daniel went back to bed and slept soundly, as did everyone in the house.

High above black eyes twirled. *Yes Daniel, I am pleased. For a moment there, she was prepared to retreat within herself again. Any delay and the hurt would have returned. Now, James will be able to turn her heart in the proper direction.*

The next morning the doctor arrived in the town for the women's check-ups. Kate, Lady Emily, and Lady Ashley all had to be there with Diana as she received her first exam. It was finally the doctor himself who got her under control. She was pregnant all right, four months along he said. The doctor also said he couldn't be sure, but he thought she was carrying four, maybe five fetuses. He said she was in excellent physical condition, and she should have no problem. She thought nothing of it. When they told Big John, he roared like a dragon; and the Blue Dragons joined in roaring their approval also for their sister.

All the women were checked, and the doctor pronounced everyone in perfect shape and doing fine. He told them that within the next month the babies would begin to arrive. Doc Paul asked that they all keep an eye on Lucy, as she was ready to pop at any moment. It was arranged that should anyone go into labor Andrew and Lady Ariel would fetch the Doc immediately. Andrew then took Doc Paul home.

The next evening, after dinner as the ladies were returning from their walk they all noticed that their dragons were descending in ones and twos on the field behind the house. They all wondered aloud about this. "What do you think is going on?"

It was Lady Emily who figured it out, "Lucy is going into labor."

Lady Kate said with great concern, "Oh hurry, we must be there for her." They quickened their pace, and bounded up the stairs noisily.

As they entered the house they heard Sam shouting, "Where is that blasted doctor? He should be here by now!"

Lady Kate felt Lady Ariel landing behind her. "He's here Sam, calm yourself."

As Doc came up the steps he looked at Kate, "didn't I just leave this place yesterday? You people sure do things fast."

As the doctor came in, he took one look at Sam and ordered the men to take him outside. And if possible, get him drunk. Then he went upstairs to the birthing room the women had prepared just in case this happened. He checked on Lucy, and said she was doing quite well. After he shoed everyone out, he went to Lucy.

"Lucy, I don't have anything I can give you for the pain. It's going to get pretty rough."

"No Doc, it won't. You see I have the dragons keening for me. I won't be in any real pain at all. Jake promised me they would take the pain away, and they have. I'm really quite comfortable right now. If you stop and be still for a moment you will hear them."

Doc Paul stood still and listened. *My God, I can hear them!* They were keening a very low humming; it was a soothing, warm, comforting sound. He felt very relaxed, at ease, not worried at all about anything. Kate and Elizabeth stepped in the room and seeing what was happening she pinched the doctor quickly.

"Ouch! What did you do that for?"

“You were being affected by the chanting, it’s just for the women in labor. It can be very addictive Doc; oh, I brought Elizabeth to assist you in the births.” Kate smiled at him contritely.

“You’re right Kate, damn it’s powerful. Lucy’s in no pain at all and she’s doing just fine. She’s already dilated to an 8... It won’t be long now. Thank you Elizabeth for helping, I can use it.”

“Kate,” Lucy called to her, “would you get the babies things from our room. They are in a blue suitcase by the big chair near the window.”

When Kate returned with the bag, Elizabeth was holding a screaming baby boy as the doctor was cleaning out his eyes. Tears streaming down her face she handed the baby to Kate and turned as the doctor delivered his sister. She took the screaming baby and washed her up also and prepared her for her mother. The dragons keening became very loud and the babies quieted. Kate and Elizabeth brought them to Lucy.

“A boy and a girl Lucy; oh God they are so beautiful!” Elizabeth was crying for more than the babies’ birth. She was finally letting go of her memories of her own daughters’ birth, and death. It was a cleansing for her. She placed the babies in Lucy’s arms and watched as Kate went to the window and opened it.

She yelled down to the men in the backyard. “Sam! Sam, get up here and say hello to your new son and daughter!”

The Dragons let out a roar of welcome that echoed across the valley to the mountain.

Jake had kept pace with the goings on and now informed Jeffery and James of the birth of the twins. *James, you may return to the town now. Lucy has given birth to her children. Elizabeth assisted the doctor, and now she needs your comfort.*

James thanked Jake for all he had done, and he was off. Daowyn was waiting for him on the mesa and they were off in a shot. It took them only 15 minutes to reach the town. James thanked Daowyn for the quick ride and bid him a good evening as he jumped down and ran to the house. There was a celebratory atmosphere about the place. Sam was upstairs with Lucy, but they were all talking about the beauty of the babies. James scanned the crowd for Elizabeth; he couldn’t see her anywhere. As he entered the kitchen he saw Kate bending over the sink. She was holding on rather funny, and he quickly realized that she was falling. He rushed to her, catching her before she hit the ground. “Lady Kate, are you all right?”

“Oh God!” Kate’s eyes opened wide, “James, oh... I think this is it for me, God bless you for being here. Ohhh! Please, go and get Daniel, I’ve got to get upstairs.” She began breathing in a panting rhythm. James entered the living room with Kate in his arms and everyone went silent. Daniel rushed forward and took Kate from him.

“She’s in labor I think, better get her upstairs.” James watched Daniel start up the stairs yelling for the doctor. James turned around to the riders and women in the room, “Ladies, you’d better prepare yourselves; I have a feeling this is going to go on all night. Every dragon from the mountain is in that field right now,” he said pointing out the backdoor, “and they look like they’re all prepared to be here for awhile.”

Sam came down the stairs at that moment. "It's a bloody miracle, she feels no pain at all, and she's just fine. I've never seen Lucy look so beautiful! And the little ones are angels, pure angels! We're going to call them Collin and Becky, hope you guys don't mind." Michael and Steve led him to the kitchen and got him a coke.

"I can't think of a greater way to honor them Sam; Jake will be pleased when he hears."
Michael patted him on the back.

Lady Sally rose unsteadily and called out to Michael. She went to take a step and her water broke. "Oh damn! Michael!"

He came running out of the kitchen and went to her. Seeing what had just taken place, he picked her up and took her upstairs quickly.

Everyone could hear Sam laughing in the kitchen. "It's your turn now my young friends! Ah Jake, you had better get ready, they are all going into labor."

James called for their attention. "Anybody else feel a little pressure? Come on ladies, we might as well get you all upstairs now."

Lady Emily stood, along with Lady Beth and Lady Ashley. Andrew, Jerry and Steve all came forward and took them upstairs. Doc Paul was beside himself. He had Kate and Sally in the birthing room, Lucy had been moved to her bedroom. He sent the three other ladies to their rooms until their water broke.

Kate called for Jake. *You have to come now Jake, I want you here for the birth of my child.* She called for Daniel and asked him for a favor, "Promise me something, when our child is born, you will take him straight out to Jake. Promise me Daniel, you present him to Jake immediately!"

"I planned on doing just that Kate." He was wiping her brow with a cool cloth. "Again you read my mind, woman. God, I love you so much."

Elizabeth asked him if he wanted to be there for the actual birth, and he answered her with, "damn straight I do!" He held Kate's hand thru the entire labor, talking quietly and reminiscing about when they first met. They both laughed several times; Kate felt only pressure, no pain. Doc Paul wondered why he was there at all.

At 9:09pm that night, Kate delivered a beautiful baby boy; Daniel stared at the little bundle in his hands dumbfounded. He counted fingers and toes and marveled at the tiny angel. He could feel the love in his heart for this tiny little boy begin to build. After the doctor cut the cord and cleaned and medicated his eyes, Daniel wrapped the baby in a large towel and then in a blanket. He brought Kate her son, and asked her if he could name him Billy, after the friend he lost on the way to Dragons Hill. Then Daniel took the baby and kept his promise. He went out the door, down the stairs, and straight out the front door of the house. Everyone gathered around and watched to see what he was doing. Jake was there waiting on the front lawn.

Daniel came forward and bowed slightly, then he held his son high in the air for Jake to see. "I have a son Jake!" he shouted loudly.

A son Jake, a son! He was openly crying, tears streaming down his face. *Kate insisted that you see him first. He's beautiful Jake, like his mother!*

Jake lowered his massive head and peered at the little package before him. He blew a whiff of air on the child and then inhaled. He could smell the innocence of a pure soul, and see the mane to come. *You and Lady Kate have produced a strong child. I am well pleased in your son, Daniel. He looks to be a mighty leader some day.*

Jake reared back to his full height and spread his wings and roared a call of ‘Welcome’, and throwing back his head he fired a huge blue flame in honor of Daniel and Kate’s son.

And so it went thru the night, Lady Sally had a handsome boy, and Michael cried at his birth. He told Lady Sally that he wanted to name him Trey, after his brother who saved his life at the cost of his own. Taking a cue from Daniel, he took his son and presented him to Rah and Lady Jennie. Rah bellowed a welcome call for him. Lady Jennie was thrilled and she keened approval. Michael stood outside in wonder and awe holding his small son oblivious to everything around him. James had to go and remind him to bring the baby back inside.

Lady Ashley had a lovely little redheaded girl and Steve brought her to Daowyn and Lady Elzbeth with tears flowing. They both saluted her as the others did; Steve stood there holding his little girl lost in her beauty, and crying. Again, James had to go and get him to bring the baby back inside; he was so befuddled.

Lady Emily gave birth to a boy; Andrew was ecstatic. He and Emily agreed to name him Jared, in remembrance of the powerful dragon and his sacrifice. He presented him to Ash and Lady Ariel. Ash blew on the little baby and keened a welcome call and told Andrew that his son would be a leader one day.

Lady Beth had a lovely baby girl and Jerry was so excited that he near fainted when he saw her. He presented her to Rhontin and Lady Olivia, and followed the birth rite that had been started by Daniel and Kate; and would be carried on for centuries.

By dawn both James and Elizabeth were exhausted. Doc Paul was spent; he finally curled up on the cot in the birthing room and went to sleep.

After making sure everyone was ok, and checking the house and grounds, James went up to his room. He was very tired, and he still had not located Elizabeth anywhere. He opened the door and there she was, sitting on the side of his bed. She turned and upon seeing him went into his arms and he held her close.

“I missed you,” she told him, “It’s been unbelievable; so many babies came tonight, so many memories with them. I really need you here with me tonight.”

“I’m not going anywhere. We’re both exhausted, and our bodies and minds need rest.” He led her to his bed and they removed their clothes and climbed in and clung to each other as exhaustion overtook them. The day dawned bright with hope for the future.

The next morning the house was quiet as they rose. The new parents were in their rooms enjoying the first day with their new children. James and Elizabeth spent the day together talking and just enjoying each other’s company. She took him to the warehouse and they both indulged themselves there. James replaced his worn clothing and also picked up a few new items that he needed. They returned to the house and joined the new parents in dinner. When they retired to their room they cuddled in each other’s arms once again and sleep overtook them quickly.

The next morning as they slept, the house was emptied as all the riders returned to the mountain. All was in place for the hatching of the new queen.

James woke feeling truly rested; he reached for Elizabeth and found that she was already up. He rose and went into the bathroom. As he came out he noticed that the house was very quiet. He put on some pants and went into the hallway just as Elizabeth was coming up the stairs. She had a large glass of orange juice. "Hey there sunshine," she said handing him the large glass, "good morning."

"Is it me, or is the house too quiet? Where is everyone?" He asked her as he reached for the glass and took a long swallow.

"They're all gone, went back to Dragons Hill." She was holding a piece of paper. "Note from Daniel. They went back to Dragons Hill; and we have the house to ourselves. They will come back for us tomorrow. They all say 'thank-you for all your help,' blah, blah, blah. Rest and enjoy, you both earned it." She handed him the note.

He read it, and then read between the lines. This time was for him and Elizabeth. He was sure that Jake had arranged this. She pushed his hand with the note aside, and went into his arms pulling him to her. In a deep voice she seductively demanded, "James, take me in your arms and kiss me like you really mean it."

Surprised but pleased at her forwardness he answered her quickly, as suddenly an overpowering feeling hit him. "I've wanted to do this for sometime now." With his left hand he tilted her head, and kissed her hard, pulling her to him. He explored her mouth with his tongue. He felt her arms go around his neck as she responded with such passion that he found himself quite excited.

"Now that's a kiss," she said in a husky voice as they parted. "I want more of you, James, much more than I thought I ever would again." And then she whispered..., "you make me feel alive. If I'm on the wrong track please tell me now before I make a complete fool of myself."

"You're not on the wrong track, and you'll never be a fool. I've been feeling it myself lately. I've tried to deny it, but I find that I don't want to anymore. I care for you, Elizabeth, more than I thought I could. I want you... I want to make love to you Elizabeth, make you cry out..."

Her hand went to his mouth, "Yes, I want those things too! But more important, I want them from you James." She was looking him right in the eye when she said it.

She began to remove her clothing, and he did the same, slowly they watched each other. He pulled her to him and began kissing her neck, her lips, and her breasts. She pressed herself to him and he lifted her and laid her on the bed. She reached up and pulled him to her kissing him passionately. She pressed herself to him seductively wrapping one leg around his. During the next hour he sought to please her, and he did so, even making her call out his name. But she also knew how to give pleasure and he soon found that he couldn't contain himself. She pulled herself to him wrapping her legs around him. They set a pace that was soon quickened as their passion grew. He was feeling her warmth, and her love. He found himself enjoying her body; he couldn't get enough of her. She was obviously feeling the same as she rose with each of his thrusts to meet him. She clung to him tightly, and he found that he enjoyed her clinging to him so. He could hear a roaring in his head, and he felt that he would explode. They both rose up facing each other and came in a blinding flash of light. The room was engulfed in light and electricity as they were bonded to each other in love. They clung to each other not wanting to let go. After a bit they lay down beside each other. Outside, they both heard the deep, loud roar of a very large dragon.

Valotin!

James sat up, “he’s back! It's Valotin, and he’s outside!”

He looked at Elizabeth and she understood immediately. She told him to go to his dragon. James slipped his pants on and ran down the stairs. Elizabeth ran to the front bedroom to watch. Her hand went to her mouth in awe at the size of the creature on the front lawn. He was a deep dark forest green, at least 40 feet, unbelievably huge; but so beautiful that her eyes filled with tears just to look upon him.

James dashed out the front door and ran straight to his dragon. He stopped short as he noticed the difference in his friend. Bowing he exclaimed: *Hail to the Mighty Valotin, Fourth of the Ancients!*

So you have heard the news. Valotin lowered his head as James rushed up and threw his arms around him. Ah, you missed me my friend, and I you, yes indeed. I am pleased to see that your heart has healed. You were so sad for such a long time, as was I. So, where is this rider of my Queen? I would see the woman who has healed your heart.

James turned and saw her at the upstairs window. He turned around; *you can call her out here, my friend. You can do that now, right? Her name is Elizabeth.*

Valotin reared back to his full height and spread out his wings. He roared once and then came forward. *Lady Elizabeth; please come out and present yourself to me. You have been watching from above, and I feel what is in your heart.*

Elizabeth wrapped a sheet around her naked body and came running out of the house. She stopped just in front of James. She was grinning from ear to ear. She bowed formally before Valotin. *My God, you are fantastic! You take my breath away! Oh James, how lucky you are to have such a friend. I can hardly wait to meet my dragon.*

She does have a way with words James, Valotin said as he lowered his head level with hers. He blew in her face and took in a long breath. Ah! I believe that you two are well suited for each other. Your dragon is to be my Queen, my dear Lady and she will arrive sometime tomorrow. Lady Kate asked me to relay a request for you to close up the house. I shall return at dawn to bring you both back to Dragons Hill. Now go back and enjoy each other again.

As dawn rose over the town the next morning, James and Elizabeth were on the front lawn waiting for Valotin to arrive. They were both looking towards the future with hope. The possibilities were endless, and now that they had each other, they would be unstoppable.

EPILOGUE

Future History would show that the forces of the Mighty Valotin and his Warrior Queen Valeria saved Europe; in battle they were formidable and had no equal. One year after they left Dragons Hill, Valotin made his push across Europe with Alakar, Ichor, and the White at his side. It took him 52 days and many battles to run the big bull down. A fierce and costly battle finally ended it once and for all. Once this was accomplished, the rest of Europe fell like dominoes. As the years flew by, all of Asia was freed, and then the Middle East and Africa. In time James and Elizabeth had two daughters; they in turn married the sons of Sarah and Jackson. The line was a strong one in Europe, and they were all well liked.

Out on the West coast, Diana gave birth to six children, three boys and three girls. She had no problem in handling six children; in true dragon fashion, she palmed out the rearing of the children to her brothers and sisters. Six Blue Dragons finally managed to get riders. They all proved to be remarkable children who could speak telepathically to dragons and humans alike. Big John and Diana were able to make contact with the survivors all along the West coast. The people were enthralled with the Blue Dragons, and they accepted them with great respect, especially after Surfman opened his mouth and began to speak. From then on there was no stopping their fame. Surfman was beloved mostly by the surfer crowd who returned once again after the coast was cleared, and found he gave new meaning to the phrase 'curl a wave'. It would be the Blue Dragons, with help from Enaj, who would free the Pacific and Asia.

Dragons Hill flourished as it was meant to; Jake continued to heal the people of the world in his quiet unobtrusive way, as was his task. As each new Leader and Ancient emerged, they would make the trip to Dragons Hill to present themselves before Jake. His wisdom and knowledge continued to guide them all as the world was gradually brought back from the brink.

Slowly contact was made with the rest of the country. Little towns here and there began to emerge. As news of the Dragons spread from town to town, people wanted to know how they came about. Master Jeffery was asked to write down all that had happened, from the very beginning with Kate entering the hatching grounds and finding Jake, to the final battle with the black devils. In time Jeffery became the curator of the Dragon Chronicles, in which he recorded all the adventures of the Dragons of Light. When printing presses were finally up and running again there was a very large demand for this particular book. But for here and now, books were out of the question till they found people with the knowledge of printing.

So Master Jeffery came up with an idea borrowed from history; he had each town send someone to learn the story. Soon Town Criers became the fad once again. Jeffery was kept very busy for several months training these young men. And he saw to it that before they left Dragons Hill to begin telling their story, they all met with Jake, and dined with Kate and Daniel. The experience would leave its mark on each and every one of these men. Once they returned to their towns they were in great demand. When the people learned the details, 'First Contact' and the emergence of Jake became the most sought after tale to relate. People wanted to know what Kate and Daniel looked like; but most of all they wanted to see a picture of Jake. So Master Jeffery asked Leo to make a portrait of Kate and Jake, and Daniel and Queenie, to pass to all the Town Criers. Thru the telling and retelling of the story, Kate became revered around the known world. She would go down in history as 'The One - she who made first contact'.

History would show that that one step laid the groundwork that would eventually free the entire world of the black monsters, and bring it back from near extinction. And Jake, much to his chagrin, became a legend in the people's eyes. Privately he would chuckle over that.

Contact was re-established with Thunder Mountain, and it was Lester Wilde, himself, who answered Daniel's questions. He told Daniel that he was right to leave when he did; that things got pretty bad for a while. Eventually, the people were the ones who took over the mountain after years of tyrannical rule. But the cost was great as Lester lost his wife in the battle. Using his famous listening device he was able to locate the mysterious Dragon Riders, and he sent a group to make contact. Daniel invited him to Dragons Hill and Lester was completely blown away by the dragons. His 7-year old son, Jonathan, heard an egg calling to him two hours after arriving. Unsure of what was going on, he asked Uncle Daniel 'who the little children were' that he could hear calling him. Lester was amazed at this turn of events, but he agreed to let his son go. Jonathan's dragon proved to be Zao-Ting, Giver of Laws, Seventh of the Ancients. Together they would set this new world in order with the 'Rules of Life'. Guidelines to live by that would be adopted around the world, and handed down from generation to generation

The remaining marauders all banded together as one large army and challenged the Dragon Riders. There was a major battle with Daniel's forces, and some of the Dragons were injured. But the marauders were no match for Daniel and his army, and they were soon erased from the face of the earth. The people they had held as slaves were released, and in time, and with Jake's help, healed as well.

Oreo lived to a ripe old age; she was near sixty when her old heart finally gave out. The Dragons roared and keened at her passing, as they all felt it to their core. She was accorded the honor of a Dragons Funeral, and it was the Queen herself who flamed Oreo to the next world. Many years later, Lady Sally's great grandson chuckled upon seeing his newly hatched dragon and smiled knowingly. She was black and white with a white diamond shape on her forehead. She told him her name was Lady Oreo, and she had returned.

Tab spent his remaining days in the company of Lady Emily's dragon, Ash. He never quite healed from the battle with that mutant bear. He slept most of the time now, and always near his friend Ash. And then one bright spring morning Ash took him for his last ride. And everyone swore that day that there were tears in that mighty dragon's eyes.

The children of this new world all grew up knowing nothing but dragons. As babies they were often keened to sleep by the dragons; they learned to fly before they could walk, and most were in contact with dragons before they learned to speak. Their early years were spent in the company of dragons and often playing with them. Dragons loved little babies, they found them to be pure souls, and enjoyed their joy in the world. Many dragons, as well as John and Alexandria, schooled the children. And when they were ready, Master Jeffery taught them all he knew of Dragon History.

Many years went by, and the world slowly returned to normal again, or as normal as could be expected in these strange times. Many people declined to re-inhabit the old cities. Instead they built their own little towns and hamlets around the base of Dragons Hill. The towns were spaced about ten to fifteen miles from each other. Trade was once again established between the towns, but there was no more rushing about, no more hard sell. Friendly barter was the currency now. People took their time; they enjoyed the simple things in life. Family became the most important thing now. Men and women visited other towns in search of husbands and wives. Matchmakers became the vogue again.

About five years after the final battle, Jake and Queenie along with Daniel and Kate traveled around the country to see how the people were doing in this new world of ours. They started out by visiting the nearby towns near Dragons Hill. They were all accorded great respect; the people looked upon the dragons with great awe. Feeling good about what they saw in these towns and villages, they then went all the way to the east coast and started across the entire country.

Kate and Daniel were impressed at the kindness and hospitality they were shown by all. Some of these towns were well fortified and well stocked; and then others just 10 to 15 miles away were barely getting by.

At a suggestion from Jake, several of the well stocked towns began to share with their less fortunate compatriots. As a reward for their compassion and generosity, Jake called for two rider candidates from each town. He told them all that if these riders passed the test, they would have their own Dragons to patrol the area. Needless to say, word spread that these towns had the special favor of the Dragons because of their good deeds. It was not too long before people considered it a great honor to have Jake visit their town. As expected, Dragons Hill was soon flooded with requests from other towns begging for a visit from Jake and Queenie.

Many, many years later Kate asked Jake what he thought about the way the human race was returning to the world. Were they doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past; or had they learned something from almost becoming extinct as a race.

Jakes eyes twirled and he chuckled and replied; *things are really coming along quite nicely.*