

# VALOTIN

## BOOK TWO OF THE FIRST YEARS

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# PROLOGUE

**Sometimes it's not the way you mix something; it's the ingredients you put together. Take one over-zealous archeologist, (hell-bent on making a name for himself); add a ten-man team of untrained professionals, (committing all the sins of the unprofessional). Toss them together and place them in an unexplored cavern littered with fossilized 'boulders'.**

**When Professor Wilson entered the unexplored second cavern under a military base in Nevada, he took with him several of his students; all untrained and untested in the field. The cave was littered with many large oval-shaped 'boulders'. Dr Wilson wrongly guessed that they were just stone, probably being prepared for a sculpture rendering later. He couldn't have been more wrong; and his error would cost him his life.**

**These 'boulders' were actually dormant, hibernating dragon eggs. All it took was a touch, a skin on 'stone' contact, to awaken the sleeping occupant. The warmth from the skin, like an electric shock, passes thru to the egg instantly and results in awakening! Dragons emerging from their eggs without a rider to link with telepathically descend into madness. They need the telepathic link to stabilize their violent natures. A dragon without a rider is a very dangerous thing; mad and clever at the same time. They will seek out their 'brothers'; and destroy anything in their path.**

**Days spent in the adjoining cave studying the many fossilized bones strewn about the chamber held the attention of the professor and his charges. There was plenty to keep the 'diggers' occupied; they were rebuilding an entire flying creature, perhaps a new creature. Mesmerized by the skeleton of a fully-grown 'pterodactyl', the professor kept his charges busy. So busy in fact, that they were oblivious to the goings on in the outer chamber. This was a perfect time for the so-called 'fossilized egg', (already mature), to hatch. Enraged at not finding its rider, it began to feed on the meal it saw before it in the adjoining cavern... then it woke its brothers.**

**Four fifths of the world population was wiped out within a year. Four years later the survivors were beginning to fight back.**

**They say hope keeps a person going when all else is gone. One survivor kept it alive in her heart when all was dark in the world. It was insane, crazy to even think of it but Kate held on to the thought that there was some kind of master plan in all this insanity. Every obstacle she faced, every loss she endured; foremost in her mind was the belief that she and her small group were being prepared for something.**

**Shaped and molded for a year by very special dreams, Kate and her small group was readied to accept the possibility of a different kind of world, a new world. Guided by some unseen and unknowable force, Kate found Jake - and then everything changed.**

**Jake, the First of the Ancients to return - the Healer. He would heal the old wounds and return order to the land. He brought Kate and Daniel together; and with their pairing, his Queen made her entrance.**

**He and his Queen produced 20 children (one of which would become the Second of the Ancients). He had cultivated riders across the country for four years; now he gathered them up and introduced them to his children. With their bonding and then eventual hatching he had his army. He trained them both in the art of dragon fighting. He rid our land of the monsters that destroyed it; and then set about healing the people.**

**With North America free of the deadly menace, Jake's intelligent black eyes now looked towards Europe. They would be next to free themselves, as their need was great. For in Europe the menace had taken the form of an old enemy... NaTas.**

**An ancient battle was about to be replayed, hopefully for the last time.**

Those across the Atlantic did not fare well. Aware of this, Jake contacted Alakar, Third of the Ancients – the Rescuer. He set plans in motion that would ultimately lead to their deliverance. Alakar's base of operations was located in Scotland. Jake learned they were late to the game of dragon fighting. The black devils had a much longer time to increase their numbers, and their dragons were fit and strong.

It was a long hard search for Alakar to find and rescue riders for his camp; and then he had to hurriedly play catch-up in training his recruits. It was made more difficult as they were under constant attack. They had lost their first hatching ground in a surprise attack by the black devil, and the second had fared little better. Half of its eggs and would-be riders were lost. It was a devastating blow to their cause. When the remaining eggs hatched, Alakar kept these dragons hidden as long as possible. He feared the newly hatched dragons would be attacked before they could build up their strength. With the morning sunrise to conceal their departure, Alakar secretly took these dragons to a hidden glen on the shores of Loch Ness. Alakar and his rider, Peter hoped they would be able to buy some time there for these dragons to mature and grow stronger. Leaving their camp in a shambles, as though they had all fled quickly, had been the idea of Peter's friend James, and his dragon Valotin. It proved to be the catalyst that bought them the time they needed.

The large black bull that ruled the devils assumed that they had all fled in fear of him. His great ego would eventually be his undoing.

Eight months later Peter led his dragons out the loch and began to push his way back to the mountains between Inverness and Fort William. In long conversations with Jake, Alakar had learned some of the fighting skills of the Dragons of Light. He had trained his dragons and riders just as Jake had instructed. He had trained them hard and well, and now the pay off was about to be realized. They waited for sunrise and attacked the bull's camp with the sun at their backs. They destroyed it completely; 100 of the devils fell that day, and the big black bull barely got away with a few of his minions. It was the first time in almost two years that Alakar had the upper hand. The riders began to feel that maybe they had a chance. Taking careful precautions this time, and wary of the bull and his surprise attacks, they settled into a long abandoned castle on the side of a mountain. They dug into the mountainside making huge caves above and around the existing castle. Guards were kept on patrol at all times. They scoured the countryside destroying any and all hatching grounds with abominations in them. They rid the area of the black menace. Three months went by and they heard nothing of the black bull. It was as if he disappeared off the face of the earth. Alakar knew that was too good to be true. Then they got wind of a possible hatching ground up near Thurso, Scotland. Several of the monsters had been seen in the area. It was a far piece away, but Alakar knew they couldn't afford to ignore it – they had to check it out.

With his Queen by his side, Alakar was once again on the offensive. He knew that this could be dangerous, but he also knew that he had to go. They left early before sunrise, and headed towards the mountainous region ever on the alert. James' mate Catherine had insisted on coming along. She had just learned she was with child and James had wanted her to stay behind. She promised she would stay in the heights and not engage in any fighting.

Halfway through their journey they were attacked on all sides in a well-planned assault. At least 10 large black dragons went for Alakar and Valotin. Fearing for James and Valotin, Catherine and her dragon, Lady Versula, dove on the monsters to pull them away. She succeeded too well and the beasts turned on them both, and before anyone could get to them they were pulled down.

**An anguished cry echoed throughout the mountain as both Valotin and James roared out their horror. Blinded by hate and filled with rage, Valotin and James began to attack the black devils with vengeance. They went from dragon to dragon ripping them in half and firing them to ash. Seventy-eight dragons fell in shredded tatters or flaming balls that day. The big bull quickly realized his mistake and ran.**

**Valotin and James were covered in blood and ash, bloody sweat dripped from both their bodies. Alakar and Peter tried to console them, reason with them, but they were numb to everything but hate and revenge. They charged after the bull with Valotin roaring out his pain across the mountaintops. Sensing them coming after him, the bull set his minions on them - Valotin tore thru them in seconds. There was pure uncontrollable rage in Valotin's eyes, and the bull knew that rage well. He knew he would not be able to stop them; so he fled at lightening speed. He made for the mainland of Europe; they would be unable to follow his trail once he made it there.**

**Alakar and Peter caught up with Valotin and James and finally managed to get thru to them. They were spent; sorrow and grief enveloped them both just as the ash covered their bodies. Their pain was like a living breathing thing. Peter hoped that in time they would heal. The next several months were a nightmare as they were attacked everywhere they went. The black bull made their lives a living hell. James and Valotin became sullen and withdrawn. They spent more and more time away from the group; they would be gone for days at a time. Alakar assured Peter that this was as it was supposed to be, for Valotin and James had a different destiny.**

**And then early one morning before sunrise, the black bull attempted to attack their castle base. He sent his minions in to destroy the castle and kill anyone they saw, (a costly mistake he would soon realize). Alerted to their proximity by some inner force, Valotin and James felt their rage start to build again. But this time they channeled it not to blind hate, but rather to calculated justice. They watched them come over the mountainside and dive on the castle. They rose to meet them and exploded into a living, breathing ball of blue-white fire.**

**Alakar sounded the alarm, and stood transfixed as he watched what was taking place before him. Instinctively he realized what was happening and stopped the other riders and dragons from joining the fight. He told them to just observe; this was something that had to take place.**

**Valotin and James were destroying everything in their path. James had a large staff in his hands; it appeared to be very old, older than time itself. As Valotin would fire at one dragon, James would use the Staff to fire at another. The fire of blue-white light was flashing so fast and dragons were incinerated so quickly that it was like watching a video on super fast speed.**

**Seeing what was taking place, the black bull screamed out his rage and retreated quickly leaving his minions to their fate. In a panic, the last of these tattered and crazed dragons tried to rush Valotin and James. They were met with such a fiery blast that they were consumed before they realized their mistake. Panting and dripping with sweat, and blood, Valotin and James looked about them in surprise at their accomplishment.**

**Approaching them cautiously at first, Alakar made sure they were still not in the throes of blind rage again. Assured by Valotin that they were in their right minds, Alakar congratulated them on a fight well done. Alakar asked James when and how he received the Fire Staff. James told him that he had seen it in a dream embedded in the rocks on the top of a mountain. He and Valotin had gone and retrieved it the night before. Alakar ordered them both to rest, to eat and build their strength back up. The black bull would not be returning anytime soon.**

**That evening Alakar conferred with Jake about what had taken place. After much deliberation Jake and Alakar decided upon a plan. Several days later Alakar asked for a volunteer to attempt to fly to the States and seek out Jake, the First of the Ancients, at Dragons Hill and ask for his help. He knew that Valotin and James would step forward to undertake this task. They would think that they were going to their deaths, but in reality they would be going to fulfill a prophecy: The Prophecy of the Phoenix.**

# **REGROUP**



James and Elizabeth stood on the front lawn of the Rider's house and waited for Valotin to arrive. Coming to Dragons Hill was the best thing he and Valotin had done. Little did he and his companion suspect that here both would heal; and James would find Elizabeth. He had found love again, a love that was different from any he had ever known. Elizabeth had healed also, in finding James she had put the past aside at last. They were both looking forward to the future with hope and excitement. As Elizabeth stood outside the house in the town, she looked towards Dragon Hill; she could make out a very large dragon headed their way.

"He's on his way James!" She called very excited; she wanted to get back as soon as possible as she knew her dragon would be hatching this day.

"Calm yourself my love; your queen will not hatch before you arrive." James enjoyed watching her excitement grow. She constantly surprised him with her lust for life and everything in it; she took nothing at face value, she questioned everything.

*My friends, I see you waiting for me.* Valotin greeted them as he circled and lined up for a landing, *your spirits shine bright with happiness!*

*And you my friend are looking very regal today!* James saluted his friend as he landed on the lawn.

Elizabeth held her breath as she watched him land. His size was that of a colossus; twice the size of Jake. He was the biggest dragon she had ever seen. Yet he gracefully landed on the lawn in front of them. She shouted out; *You are indeed a king among dragons, Valotin. Your Queen will be worthy of you - I can guarantee that!*

*Oh, so the rider of my Queen can predict the future now?* Valotin roared loudly as he lowered his massive head in front of them both.

James went to him and gave him a long hug. *I have missed you my friend. I have missed our long talks.*

*And I have missed your company also, my friend.* Raising his head, Valotin now addressed them both, *now we must be off. There is much to do and learn before we return to our homeland. And my Queen is anxious to join us.*

He lowered his left wing, and James showed Elizabeth how to climb up and on to the ridges of his neck. He showed her that with his great size, Valotin was very different from the dragons she was used to. It was most important to find the sixth ridge, and use this as her perch. She would find the same area on her Queen once she hatched and matured enough for First Flight. He then loaded their duffel bags and they were soon on their way back to Dragons Hill.

Elizabeth was thinking of all that happened since she was brought to the mountain. How her life had changed when she found her beautiful companion; and of course there was James. James who brought her back to life, who showed her it was all right to feel again, who accepted her as his equal; and she loved him for it. And of course there were the dreams; dreams showing her that her future was across the sea with him. She looked forward to the future, as long as it was with James. She would follow him anywhere, even across the sea. But for now, she wanted to get back and meet her dragon. And then she wanted to see all those beautiful babies she had helped bring into the world. As they approached the large Mesa they could hear all the dragons keening; it was a soft sound, very relaxing, very calming.

James knew right away what they were doing. *They're keening for the babies, Elizabeth! Do you hear?* Valotin landed amid the keening dragons.

Jake came out of the Riders Hall with Jeffery by his side, *Greetings James and Elizabeth! Your spirits are shining brightly; I salute you both on your newfound happiness.* Both bowed to Jake in respect, and thanked him. He chuckled loudly and continued; *Daniel and Steve have prepared a cave for your use while you are with us. They said to tell you it is their gift to you both for all your help during the births.*

Yes, Jeffery interrupted, *I must speak with you both in regards to that matter.* Jeffery went to James and shook his hand, and gave Elizabeth a hug.

“I want to get all the facts down correctly for the Chronicles. Please come by and see me when you both have a few minutes to spare. I find that if I speak to the participants early on, their memories are fresh with details.”

*Master Jeffery is very meticulous about the Chronicles; we shall have quite a history book by the time he is through.* Jake explained praising Jeffery; *he spent quite a long time with Valotin yesterday.*

*Yes, yes Jake. I have enough information from Valotin to fill four or five chapters! I shall be very busy for some time.* Jeffery was patting a large black leather bound book he held in his hands.

James could see that Jeffery really loved his work. *That is one book I want to take with me when I return. Do you think you could possibly make a copy for me by the time we have to leave and return home? I know that it would be a great morale booster, and Lord knows they probably need it.*

Jeffery perked up at that, *Yes, yes! I have several new helpers and this would be a good test of their skills. You shall have a copy of this book to take with you on your return to Europe, James. I should have thought of that myself, sorry, sorry..!* Jeffery's mind was already on something else and he walked off patting the book.

*His work keeps him occupied, and his mind is always working; he is a priceless treasure. We dragons find him unique among humans.* Jake had spoken from the heart in regards to Jeffery. *When you return James, you must find one like Jeffery to keep records of your journey across Europe. We will discuss this and other things tomorrow when you both begin your training. For now, go and enjoy the day.*

*Yes Jake, there is much to do, and so little time to do it in; we will see you tomorrow.* James picked up their things and he and Elizabeth headed for the landing stairs. They followed it down to the second level and met Michael on his way up.

“James! Elizabeth! Good to see you. Please let me help with those things.” He said grabbing a duffel bag from Elizabeth. “I’ll show you where your cave is; it’s right next to ours. Come, follow me.”

He went out the exit and down the landing and then crossed over to the other mountain and up a pathway. They met no one on their way, and James thought it strange that Daniel wasn’t there to greet them. But perhaps the baby was occupying his free time.

“Here it is, please go in,” said Michael with a grin on his face.

As they went in, they were greeted with a loud, “Welcome back!” The riders were all there welcoming them. The men were beaming, and the women were holding their precious future. Kate rose and with Daniel by her side came up to them. She enveloped them both in her arms, “Thank you both for the help you gave us all. We are all very happy for you both on your new found happiness.” Daniel gave Elizabeth a one-arm hug and lowered his swaddled son for her to see.

**“Oh Daniel, he’s just beautiful!” Elizabeth gushed. Then she went from rider to rider and cooed over each child. James spoke with the men and they were all boasting about how smart their son or daughter was and how their future would be a safe one now.**

**“All right everybody, listen up,” Sam was barking orders like a drill sergeant, “we’ll meet down at the Hall for lunch and more talk but for now the wee ones need their feeding and a nap.” He had them all on a tight schedule. Slowly at first, they started to leave, and after a bit they were all gone except for Sam. He gave them both a big hug, and a, ‘see you later’, leaving James and Elizabeth alone, at last.**

**Elizabeth dragged their duffle bags over to the bed and was unpacking when James came up behind her. He slid his hands around her waist and gave her a squeeze. *Are you ready for all this my lovely yank? I feel after today, we will be going at a pretty fast pace.***

***With you by my side, I’m ready for anything.* She turned and faced him sliding her arms up and around his neck. They kissed gently, and then more passionately. *If we keep this up, we will get nothing done my love,* Elizabeth said in a husky voice.**

**Suddenly they both heard Valotin, *James my friend; we have a very special ride to take. I shall need you in the morning before sunrise.***

**Elizabeth looked into James’s eye, *which gives us the afternoon and night. Think we can find something to do?* James smiled and kissed her on the forehead.**

***That’s what I love about you Elizabeth you know what is important. Lets go see Jeffery and get it over with; then we will have no demands on our time.* He reached for their jackets as he grabbed Elizabeth’s hand and they headed above. Three hours later they were back in their cave. Their evening was spent pleasuring each other.**

**The next morning Elizabeth busied herself unpacking their things and making the cave a little bit homier for them. She knew they would be here for a while, at least four months, time enough for her Queen to mature and strengthen herself for the long flight they would be taking. *Oh this waiting is going to drive me crazy. I have to keep busy. My beautiful Queen, how are you this glorious day? I can hardly wait to meet you! I shall keep myself busy till you call. Now I must be off to the Hall, see you soon my Queen***

***My sweet Lady, it will be very soon now. I am so pleased that your spirit has healed. Your James is going to be a great leader as is fitting the rider of my Valotin! Be patient, it is almost time...* Elizabeth finished up in the cave and then headed down to the Hall.**

**Up above, James climbed out onto the mesa and saw Valotin and Jake waiting for him. He bowed to Jake, and to Valotin. *I’m ready for our ride Valotin.***

***Yes James, but this will be a different ride. There will be more changes when we complete this ride, but I believe you will approve. You must bring the Fire Staff with you, Valotin explained; Jake has already made arrangements with Ichor, Rah, and Wolf to join us; so if you are ready we will begin.***

***I am more than ready Valotin.* James retrieved the Fire Staff, and climbed onto Valotin’s back. With a quick leap they were airborne in seconds. As they reached the heights, James could see Ichor and Rah and Wolf waiting for them. They appeared to be glowing with a bright white light.**

As they reached them, Jake began to speak.

*James, protocol dictates that we must have your permission to proceed with this part of the enhancement. It will require the four of us to probe your mind. You will know what we know, and we in turn, will know what you know. I must caution you James, it will be invasive; we will know your every thought; all your hidden weaknesses, and your strengths. But the end result will be a great deal of knowledge passed on to you, and with that you will overcome any weakness. You will become stronger and your mind will not be clouded by doubt. Your mind and Valotin's will work as one in dealing with the black dragons overseas. Do you consent to this James?*

*You know my answer Jake. There is nothing I wouldn't do to rid this world of those devils. I consent of my own free will. I trust you and Valotin with my very life.* James wasn't sure what was about to happen, but he meant what he said, he trusted them. He knew that this had to take place.

Jake let out a huge roar: *We begin!*

A beam of bright white light shot out from Jake, it hit James and Valotin enveloping them both. James could feel electric currents coursing thru his body. A tingly sensation began in his lower back at the base of his spine and slowly began to travel up to the back of his head. He felt a surge of energy and his ears popped as if he were decompressing. Suddenly his 'mind' seemed to pop also. He could see a great deal of bright light about him; it seemed to be changing color. He began to make out familiar shapes and faces of dragons and people he knew floating in the various colors of the light.

Information began to flow quickly into his mind. He relived many things in a matter of seconds. The initial arrival of the burning dragons over Manchester; the destruction of everything and everyone he knew and the sadness he felt at their loss; trying to save some and failing; the feeling of utter helplessness; his rage against the dragons, against God, against everything. Finally acceptance and asking in utter humility for help. Asking God to help him find his way; finding Valotin, the sheer joy! Hope at last! Hope that maybe there was a way to defeat them. He relived the devastating loss of Catherine and Lady Ursula to the deadly monsters; the utter despair that descended upon both he and Valotin. Volunteering for the long trip to Dragons Hill and hoping for death. Meeting Jake; beginning to hope once more; finding love again, but a stronger different kind of love; Elizabeth – his equal! James rose in the air off Valotin's back and was encircled by the dragons. Bright lights of varying colors began to shine all about him.

Wolf came before him and showed him how he could use the thermals around the world. He showed him how to attack the devils in their weakest points. Jake was suddenly there showing him compassion for the living, acceptance of all creatures; and a feeling of separateness with all negativity and recognizing it in all living things. Seeing the light around each creature; the true nature of each. Ichor showed him great strength and what the bonding meant between him and Valotin. How they could use their strength together and channel it thru the Fire Staff. And then the information and knowledge began to flow at a faster pace. Throughout the entire ordeal James could 'feel' Valotin beside him. He knew his friend was there for him, and the knowing gave him strength to accept what was about to happen to him.

A bolt of bright white light hit him, and James arched his back and screamed. It changed to a light blue shade, felt very comforting and James quieted. A yellow light slowly encircled his head; it gradually changed to a light green color. White light shot out of James' body and encircled him in a bubble of light. Then all four dragons shot a flame of red light at James; he could feel it hit but it felt soothing. James was suddenly aware of information flowing into his mind. He suddenly knew, with complete certainty, how he was going to deal with the monsters. Knew where he was going to find new riders for his Queen's eggs. Knew where the 'sleeping one', Enaj, was hidden; and saw the one who would waken him.

James' mind was alive with knowledge; he looked at Valotin with new respect and new love. They were no longer rider and dragon; they were brothers. Then he felt his body changing, expanding and stretching, taking on a new shape. He knew this was part of the enhancement and he accepted it openly and willingly. Gradually James took on the appearance of a much younger man. His body was honed to perfection, tight and taut in the right places. His chest was built up and muscled, as were his upper arms and his legs. He hoped that Elizabeth would approve.

Almost four hours later, they were finished; James and Valotin were ready. Valotin's size had increased again by a third. And Ichor too had doubled his size, a perfect match to the dragons at home in Scotland.

Wolf now spoke to Valotin and James. *I have asked two of my dragons to return with you to your homeland to instruct the dragons of your clan as to the art of 'Surfing the Thermals; that is if you are both agreeable to the idea. Artiku and Keyana have stepped forward and agreed to do this task; but they are a bit uneasy. They do speak James, and your dragons and people might find it strange.*

James laughed, and Valotin spoke for them both; *have no fear Wolf, at this point they would be most appreciative of any aid. I will inform Alakar and he can prepare the others. They will soon get used to your brave Blue Dragons, and there should be no problem. I know once they learn to ride the thermals, we will be able to complete our tasks much quicker. Thank you for thinking of our plight Wolf, your help is most welcome.*

*Flattery is not needed Valotin, it was my pleasure to contribute to your cause. Now, I must return before Surfman and Diana get into any more trouble. Her pregnancy has turned our camp upside down. Wolf turned to leave and then turned to Valotin. I wish you well, brother. If we can be of further service, please do not hesitate to call. Till we meet again Valotin!* With that Wolf was off in a flash.

They headed back towards the mesa in silence. James was thinking of what had taken place and also of the future. Valotin was the first to put into words what they were thinking. *I have been thinking of something Wolf said; 'Ride the Thermals'. Jake, how long do you suppose it would take to reach Scotland riding the thermals?*

*I will ask Wolf; there was short period of silence and then Jake spoke again, Wolf says it depends how high you go. If you go to the top of the thermal you could be there in a little over an hour. What are you thinking of doing Valotin?*

*I think I know what you are planning my friend. James could see what Valotin had in mind for he had thought of it also. Bring Alakar and the other dragons here for a few days rest. We could all train together without the black bull knowing anything about it.*

*Yes James, it would also give a great boost to their morale. They have taken a beating for a long time, and this is greatly needed. Valotin turned to Jake continuing, they would see how the people of Dragons Hill live in peace; how the populace accepts the dragons.*

*Yes Valotin, a very good idea. Of course Jake had planned this all along. It would help to boost their courage, and the men and women would be able to rest and build up their strength. The black bull is in semi-hibernation, for it is winter in Europe now. He holes up in a large cavern in northern Germany, trapped by a blizzard. He would not even know they were gone.*

*I will contact Alakar and propose our plan. Valotin continued, If he agrees, I will ask Wolf to send his teachers. We could depart in the morning; it shouldn't take too long to teach them the maneuver. We could be back here by dinnertime.*

*Good idea Valotin, please keep me informed. I shall also arrange for my dragons to escort your large friends to the feeding grounds. They can indulge themselves for several days.*

*Jake knew that there was an overabundance of deer this year. It would do well to cull the heard and what better way to do it than to provide a feast to these battle weary giants. Jake headed for the Riders Hall thinking; and Master Jeffery would be beside himself with glee to speak with Alakar and Peter. He will have much to add to his chronicles.*

*A thought crossed Jake's mind, he smiled and looked in James' direction. James, a stay at the house in town would be very inviting for your friends. They could enjoy themselves and relax for a time. They have fought long and hard without any respite.*

*Jake knew that the atmosphere would be good for their tired souls. They could also pick up any essentials they need from the warehouses. Besides Valotin is about to be engaged for several days.*

*James answered him immediately, as usual Jake, you think of everything. That would be perfect and they could use the diversion after all they have been through. Thank you for thinking of it. Wait a minute! Engaged for several days!*

*James smiled, as he knew this meant Valotin's Queen was ready to hatch. He and Valotin thanked Ichor and Rah for their assistance in the enhancement. Valotin then confirmed what James had picked up on; his Queen was almost ready to hatch. He told James that he should return to Elizabeth and be with her when she is called. James excused himself and headed down to their cave.*

As James entered their cave he could see that Elizabeth had been busy making the place theirs. Little touches here and there that gave it a cozy, warm, homey feel. He watched as she moved about. Hearing his footsteps she turned around and stopped, staring at him wide-eyed.

“James? Oh my Lord! You... you’ve changed!” She stood there inspecting him, “all for the better I can assure you, my love. Oh my...you are so,” James took her in his arms, “James!”

“Easy there yank, I might just take advantage of you here and now,” he smiled and laughed at her enthusiasm, as he kissed her passionately.

“Oh I have no objections I assure you. In fact, right now I would find that...” Elizabeth stopped in mid-sentence, her eyes got very big. “She calls for me!”

Elizabeth grabbed James by the arm, her face beaming, “she’s hatching James! I, I have to go to her.” Elizabeth hugged James and ran out of the cave and headed up to the hatching ground.

A loud roar echoed down the mountainside, *A Queen hatches!* There was no doubt to anyone on Dragons Hill as to what was taking place.

James went down to the mess hall and found Daniel. Michael and Steve and Andrew were also at the table. “Come join us James,” Daniel called out. “It will be several hours before you see Elizabeth again.”

James joined them for lunch and sat down. Several of the other men came in and made their way over to them. They tried to put him at his ease recounting tales of their own first meeting. With Daniel and Michael at the table, James told them all of his plans to bring Alakar and Peter’s group of dragons and riders to Dragons Hill.

Daniel thought it a great idea, “from what you have told us, they have been on the go with no let up for far too long. With the vermin in hibernation for the winter months, this would be the perfect time for them to take a break. Good thinking, James!”

“Thank you Daniel. The only problem is the size of the dragons that will be coming here. Daniel, I am afraid we will have to create a larger landing area.” James could see a look of bewilderment on all their faces. He smiled and said, “Imagine eight dragons the size of Valotin, all landing at the same time, get my drift now?”

Daniel looked at Steve, “Whoa! There’s no way they will all fit on the mesa; Steve ole buddy, we have our work cut out for us! We’ll have to create a whole new mesa for these big guys.”

“And we’re going to have to do it between naptimes for the little ones. You know the women wouldn’t want us to scare them.” Steve grinned at Daniel, “maybe one finely tuned explosion. We could set the charges in strategic spots so that each explosion clears the way for the next. “

“Better still, lets ask Jake to have a few of the fellows keening to the babies while we work. That way the noise will be muffled for them.” Daniel was thinking ahead as usual, he knew Jake would help any way he could.

Elizabeth was almost out of breath as she entered the hatching grounds. She calmed herself as she allowed her eyes to adjust to the half-light of the cave. She could make out shell fragments lying about, and then she heard movement behind her.

*Turn My Lady, turn and let us meet face to face at last.*

Elizabeth heard the sweet silky voice of her Queen Dragon, and turned to face her. Before her stood a 30 foot beauty; she was a soft forest green, more subdued than Valotin, but just as rich in color. She glowed in the muted sunlight as several rays penetrated the grounds. Elizabeth was unprepared for the onslaught of emotions that engulfed her. She sank to her knees as tears streamed down her face at the vision before her; overwhelmed by the love she felt emanating from her Queen.

*I can feel you ... the love within you ...oh!* She almost swooned at the emotions engulfing her.

*My sweet beautiful Lady Elizabeth, at last we meet!* She stood her full height and extended her wings, then she reared back and came forward lowering her head till she was level with Elizabeth. She blew on her and took in a long breath.

*I am the Warrior Queen Valeria, mate to the mighty Valotin! I have been chosen for you, and you have been chosen for me. Together we shall put an end to the burning menace overseas. You have been thru the fire and you have overcome it. You have been molded for just this occasion.*

A beam of bright white light shot out and hit Elizabeth with such a force that she was almost knocked over. She began to rise up and was engulfed in Lady Valeria's wings. She began to turn slowly and she could see different shades of light all about her. Suddenly she could feel information entering her mind; she began to 'see' things. She saw dragons she would meet in the future, people she knew, and others she would soon meet. She saw a very strange and frightening dragon glaring at her. She knew who this was – her enemy. She saw the site where the final battle would be fought. She saw the castle and the mountain range where Alakar's forces camped. Then she saw where she and James and Valotin would make their permanent camp. And suddenly James was before her.

*Behold he who loves you, cooed Lady Valeria.* She saw their life together - fast paced at first, very passionate. After the final battle with the vermin, they would settle down; and then she saw their children. "Oh!" Elizabeth could actually feel James' arms go around her, felt him holding her to him. *Mmm ...yes ...*, she wanted to stay like this forever.

*You are filled with love for your mate... this is good.* The velvet tones of her dragon's voice filled her with hope. *Your mind is strong, and I am pleased that we shall fight together to rid the world of these vermin. Your mate is as strong as mine for they are as one; just as you and I shall become my lady. Now, look into my eyes and prepare to receive the knowledge of the ages!*

Two and a half hours later Elizabeth emerged from a trance-like state. She felt renewed, filled with a sense of purpose in life. She understood now everything that had happened to her in the past; she accepted her future with great anticipation.

Lady Valeria opened her great wings and Elizabeth felt herself turning. She was engulfed in a warm yellow light, cocooned in pure love, total acceptance. She relaxed her body, and the changes began. She was honed to perfection; lagging muscles were soon taut again; her breasts rose up and regained their youthful appearance. She could feel her waist and hips and backside all take on a new form. Her hair grew longer, rich and luxurious; her face took on the features of a much younger version of herself. Elizabeth expected all these changes, as she had been instructed by Jake himself as to what would take place during and after the hatching. She hoped that James would like the change in her appearance. She was bursting with happiness.



At last Lady Valeria placed her back on the ground. *I must go and present myself to my mate. I am anxious to see him, and he waits for me even now. I shall feed and return in two days.*

Lady Valeria went to the entrance and turned again to gaze upon Elizabeth. She let loose with a loud roar of ‘approval’ and then she glided out of the cave. She flew to the waiting Valotin and suspended herself in front of him; the entire populace of Dragons Hill heard his voice ‘Approval’ rather loudly. They flew about each other and entwined their long necks. Finally they flew off to the feeding grounds together.

Elizabeth was still overcome with emotion when she left the hatching grounds and slowly made her way down the mountain to their cave. She was thinking to herself: *oh James this is so wonderful! I feel such a, a connection, such a deep closeness with everything. Damn, I can’t find the right words to express what I am feeling.*

*It’s all right my sweet yank; I know exactly how you feel. It was James, answering her thoughts! We have all felt it when we met our companions for the first time. Ah, and it seems that you and I share the gift of telepathy. It will come in handy when we return to Europe.*

Elizabeth entered their cave and James was standing there waiting for her. Now it was his turn to approve of the changes in Elizabeth’s figure and face. “Well now, I didn’t think you could improve on perfection – but it seems you can!”

“Oh James,” Elizabeth rushed forward and literally jumped into his outstretched arms. “She’s beautiful James, she’s a Warrior Queen! She said her name was Valeria, the Lady Valeria. She said we were going to kick ass overseas! Well, maybe not in those exact words,” James laughed at her enthusiasm remembering how it was when he first met Valotin.

He lifted her in his arms and kissed her passionately as he carried her to their bed. “Shh, not a word; let me show you what I feel at this moment.” James laid her down and began to remove her clothes, interspaced with gentle kisses to her body. He told her he loved her more than he thought possible. With their newfound communication skills, they began making love on a whole new level. They reached new heights of ecstasy and surprised themselves with its intensity. Afterward, as they lay in each other’s arms James began to tell Elizabeth his and Valotin’s plans for the future. She approved of his bringing his friends and their dragons to Dragons Hill.

“From what you told me they could really use the rest. My Queen mentioned that they would return in two days from the feeding grounds. Is that when you plan to go get them? I would like to be able to join you, but she won’t be ready for first flight yet.”

“I wouldn’t be gone long my sweet, I should be back by dinnertime. Perhaps you can get the house in town ready, lay in some food and such. Valotin agrees that bringing them there would be good. Jake says that the chance to relax will do them all a lot of good; ‘heal their souls’ I believe is the term he used.”

James was looking forward to seeing his old friends again. “Valotin plans on speaking to Alakar himself, but I believe he is enjoying the company of his Queen tonight.”

“Can you blame him, my love? You seem to be doing the same thing.” With that Elizabeth stretched seductively and reached for James. As with their dragons, their evening was a passionate one.

Across the sea, Peter awoke with an air of expectancy. Something was going to happen; he could feel it in his bones. “brr ... blast these cold mornings ...” He concentrated on the vibrations he was picking up; this wasn’t a feeling of dread, no, this was more like – happiness, or anticipation!

*Good morning Alakar, my friend, do you feel it?* Peter called to his friend as he quickly dressed, hoping he too could pick up this strange feeling of expectancy.

*Yes my friend, something good is coming our way. I think perhaps... wait ... Valotin is calling me! Come quickly Peter, Alakar urged, we should hear this news together.*

Peter finished dressing and rushed up to the mountain landing area. As he arrived he could see his mighty friend was in deep communication. ...*Yes, yes Valotin, I hear you clearly and Peter has just arrived, please continue.*

*Greetings to you both, I have good news. I have made the transition; I am now Valotin, Third of the Ancients - Dispenser of Justice. The Prophecy of the Phoenix has been fulfilled. Plans for the deliverance of Europe are already underway. But first, you and your fellow riders and dragons are in need of a much-deserved rest. Jake and I have discussed this and we agree Peter, there is a great need for you and your riders to have some down time. There is a way to bring you all here in matter of hours; it is called ‘surfing the thermals,’ I will be bringing two teachers with me when I arrive at your camp tomorrow afternoon.*

*Tomorrow!* Peter blurted out. *By Jove, this is indeed good news Valotin. Who are these teachers you are bringing?*

*I am pleased to hear the enthusiasm in your voice Peter; you are greatly missed by my James. Ah yes, these are two very special dragons, part of a group of 22 dragons that the White found to help win the day against the black vermin over here. But these are very different dragons, some might say quite strange. Valotin chuckled, you see - they speak!*

*Speak?* Peter blurted out.

*Yes Peter, actual speech! Although the dialect is a bit strange, you will be able to understand them. Please believe me that as strange as they may seem to you, they have pure hearts; and they have no equals in battle. How they got the way they are is a long story for another time. The people here at Dragons Hill are very fond of these dragons. They are also excited at the prospect of your visit.*

*Valotin, we thank you for thinking of our need and us, Alakar answered, Yes, most assuredly yes, we will come. I shall inform the others as to what to expect in the morning. We know the black bull is holed up in a cavern somewhere in Germany. We believe he managed to get caught by a blizzard and is now entombed for the rest of the winter months. It gives us time to regroup for a bit. Alakar was feeling a lot better now that he knew Valotin had made the transition and was still aligned with him.*

*Alakar, not only have I healed in body, but also in spirit. I have a new Queen, the Lady Valeria. She is a Warrior Queen, and her rider is almost as fierce as she. Alakar, we will win against these beasts, I have seen it!* Valotin wanted to give some hope to his friends who had seen only disaster for so long.

*Valotin, we have much to discuss when you arrive. I look forward to seeing you, my brother. Farewell till tomorrow.* Alakar was feeling lifted in spirit.

*Alakar! Peter grabbed his friend's neck and hugged it vigorously. We have hope at last! We win in the end! This is sorely needed good news. Our food stocks are dangerously low; Valotin's invitation couldn't have come at a more opportune time. I shall gather the riders and inform them of this turn of events. You go and prepare the dragons.... ah my friend, good news at last!* Alakar took to the sky to gather his dragons.

Peter hurriedly headed down the mountainside and entered the castle grounds. He went to the kitchen area and put on a large kettle of water. He began humming as he got down the last of their tea bags and prepared the teapot.

His mate Cicely came into the kitchen rubbing her eyes and smoothing back her long auburn hair. "Peter, what's going on? You woke and left in such a hurry. Not more bad news; oh I don't think we can take much more! Peter, that's the last of our tea - are you mad?"

He was grinning at her the whole time she was speaking. He grabbed her hands in his and brought them both to his mouth and kissed them. "My sweet, I have wonderful news! In fact everybody should be here to hear it." With that he turned and grabbed two large pots and began banging them together. "Come on you bunch of lazy twits! Get your bloody asses out of the rack; report gentlemen!"

Cicely thought the strain had finally got to him. She called to her dragon the Lady Annya and asked her to contact Alakar, that Peter was having a breakdown. She was told that Peter had wonderful news for them all and not to worry; he was simply overjoyed.

Riders came rushing down the castle stairs and into the large kitchen. Half dressed, clutching weapons, and rubbing sleep from their eyes they stood there looking at Peter.

"Great news chaps, we're going to the States! We've all been invited by the First and his camp to spend some time at Dragons Hill. Valotin says we are to come; and he will be here tomorrow afternoon. He's going to show us how we can get there in less than two hours!" Peter looked to each one of his crew. "Well? Is that good news or what?"

"Valotin says," asked a decidedly sardonic voice, "and who is he to give orders?"

Perceval Haverton was the nearest thing they had to aristocracy; he was the son of Lord Wilson Haverton, 5<sup>th</sup> Earl of Wessex. He was an insufferable bore, full of himself. Peter never would have considered him as a rider had he not already found and bonded with a dragon egg. He had actually begged to be allowed to join the group to protect his friend, the dark green Essex. Vail, as he preferred to be called, proved his worth time and again, he was a deadly shot with a crossbow. He and James were best friends, though Peter could not understand why.

"If you bothered to come to any of our meetings you would have heard the news that Valotin has fulfilled the Prophecy of the Phoenix." Vail looked at Peter as though he was speaking in tongues. "Oh really Vail!" Peter threw his hands up in the air, "he's become the Fourth of the Ancients - Dispenser of Justice."

"And James? What of James?" James was the only one who bothered to try to be friendly with him and Vail actually liked him. He had driven Peter to distraction over his concern for James when Catherine and her dragon were lost.

**“James is just fine; he has managed to heal in body and spirit; and he has found a new mate. She rides a warrior Queen dragon, Valotin’s new mate.”**

**The men and women gathered around the large table in the kitchen area. The tea kettle began its scream of ....‘I’m ready, pick me up!’ As Cicely poured the hot water into the teapot, the small band of riders grabbed their mugs and sat round the table.**

**“Valotin will be bringing some special dragons with him. They fly the thermals around the earth all the time, and they are willing to instruct us in how it is done. Valotin says that once we learn how to do this, we can go anywhere on the planet in a matter of hours. These dragons are personal friends of the First, Jake. Valotin also says that they are very strange, for you see - they speak.” Peter waited to see their reaction.**

**Reggie was the first to catch this, “you mean actual speech, like us?” Peter nodded. There was stunned silence for several moments. And then the room exploded with voices shouting questions at Peter.**

***It was Alakar who brought order, my friends calm yourselves; yes, it is true. Valotin will explain all when he arrives tomorrow. They do speak, and Valotin hopes that you will accept them as teachers. He also says to tell you they have no equals in battle - he has seen it himself.***

**“Ladies and gentlemen, if we are to leave here tomorrow, there are some things that need doing. After breakfast tea we need to get started. You all know about storing your things, we will also need to lock up the food stores as well. I want the castle buttoned up tight. And Terry, we will have to leave food out for the dogs.” Peter watched as they finished their tea, and then made ready for the day. He was proud of every one of them; they were really a good group of people.**

**Reginald was from Wales, a large man, hearty in body as well as spirit, he rode the dark chocolate brown rowdy male named Ragnar. Reggie found his match in Lady Cynthia; she stole his heart from their first meeting. Reggie’s ruddy complexion and flaming red hair were what caught Lady Cynthia’s eye; but it was his hearty laugh that captured her heart.**

**Cynthia was the daughter of a Vicar from Edinburgh, hardly the type you would think of as rowdy. The catastrophic disaster had brought about drastic changes in some peoples personalities; and Lady Cynthia was one of them. She went from a quiet wallflower that watched her family die at the hands of those beasts, into a cold-blooded cunning fighter. She rode the light creamy brown Lady Risa. Lady Cynthia was quite beautiful and at first glance the proper English lady; about 5’5”, slim and fit, pale white porcelain skin and jet black hair.**

**A renewed lust for life, made her open to people she never would have given a second glance to before the burning. She had many ‘suitors’, all of whom she dropped like hot potatoes when she met Reg. She and ‘Reggie’, as she liked to call him, were a fearsome team when they went into battle, and a lusty, rowdy pair when not. Peter considered them valuable, tho’ highly volatile assets to his team of fighters.**

**His second team was Theodore and Susanna; they were lethal fighters. Theo was the son of computer programmer. He was a hacker of some renown among that select group of people, very good at getting into places. He proved his value any time they needed to get into any of the buildings near the military bases; he could open any door. His parents had emigrated from South Africa because of their interracial marriage and their fear for their son’s well being. They needn’t have worried. His golden brown color coupled with his handsome good looks and magnetic personality made him most popular in his school years. He was voted most likely to succeed. There were always many invitations to parties and many young girls sought out his company.**

He excelled in the theatre, and this naturally led to an offer in the cinema industry after his college years. It was, unfortunately, a day too late, as they say. He rode the large adobe-red Kaseem.

Susanna, his mate, had been the daughter of a Cabinet Minister. She was an exotic-looking beauty; tall and athletic, her close-cropped hair and almond eyes gave her the regal appearance of a Nubian princess. She rode the creamy reddish brown Lady Kai. Theo and Susie were a force to be reckoned with. Many times they had crawled all night to get up to one of the hatching grounds the devils had. They would steal in and one by one they would silently destroy the eggs and the abominations they held. That was how they had met and it was also how they had stumbled across their own dragons. They were excellent fighters and showed no fear in battle.

And then there was Sean and Terrance - his deadliest team. Sean was big, tan, and very athletic, he had been an avid mountain climber and ski instructor with rugged good looks. Terrance, decidedly effeminate, was thin and wiry; he was also a world-renowned chef. These two misfits had found each other and in doing so had formed an alliance that produced a cold-blooded deadly team. They would take on the most dangerous task and complete it happily. Many of the black devils fell at their hands, and many ran when they saw them coming. Peter never judged them; he simply accepted them exactly as they were and included them in every facet of his operation.

There had been several more, but they were lost in the last several months. Devastating attacks had depleted their ranks severely. Valotin was right; they needed some down time desperately. He hoped that their strange group would be welcome at Dragons Hill.

“Terry old boy, I rather like the idea of talking dragons,” Sean began, “I mean, it might be different, but everything is different now!” Sean was always up to new things. “If Valotin says they are good fighters and accepted by all, then so what if they talk.”

“I like the idea too Sean,” Terry added, “if the First accepts these dragons without any fuss; then they should accept us without any problem. I mean, like you said, things are different now, and the First said we were all welcome. Well, I can tell you I’m not going to fret over it; we’ll just see what tomorrow brings.”

*Well said my friend. I like you and think you are just fine. Lady Drucilla (Terry’s dragon) saw no problem with him. She found him to be very sensitive to her and the other dragons. But when he went into battle he would put on his ‘super-hero face’, as he called it, and he would become someone else. He had great reserves of courage that fueled her fire to such intensity that she could fell many of the devils without much exertion. If the First invites us all, then he must like you too. I just do not understand what the problem is... it just does not make any sense.*

*We shan’t worry about it my sweet love; you and Sean are all I need in this world. Terry told her softly; tomorrow will bring what it brings. Fretting over it will do no good. Now let us be about our work.*

He grabbed a handful of the blankets he was folding and carried them down the stone castle steps to the storage room in the cellar. He opened one of the metal trunks and placed them inside neatly. The room contained six of these large containers. Just in case the devils decided to fire the castle, at least their gear and their food supplies would be protected from the flames. They had used these in the past and found they worked quite well.

Peter’s team spent the rest of the day packing their gear and getting ready for the arrival of Valotin in the morning. That night Terrance cooked up a small feast. They were chatty and light-hearted at the evening meal.

Each voiced their excitement at the turn of events, and also marveled at the strange ascension of Valotin to Fourth of the Ancients. After the meal they made their rounds and hours later all was quiet as each went to bed with hope and anticipation of the coming day.

Dreams joined them in their slumber, special dreams of hope and final victory.

Across Europe, in a cold dark cave in Germany, 12 black dragons curled up around a larger one in a giant circle trying to keep warm. The cold was unforgiving, seeping into everything. There was no letup in the blizzard. The wind just kept pounding the cave walls. The piercing cold penetrated everything with its bite as if it were a living, breathing thing.

The large black bull was filled with rage at getting caught like this by a freak blizzard. All he felt was cold; cold creeping into his bones; making it almost impossible to move, let alone breathe. The cave was cramped; too small to hold so many dragons.

There was only one way to survive this type of cold and he knew it; he must go into a deep sleep, he must go into hibernation. The only good to come out of all this was the fact that no one knew where he was; so he felt safe amidst all his dragons. At least they would provide some small bit of warmth against the bitter cold - miserable bastards though they were.

No, he could do nothing against a storm of this magnitude except wait it out. When the thaw came he would strike quickly destroying those do-gooders once and for all. They were probably fairing no better than he. He would bide his time for now.

Sleep, sleep was the best thing for now. The great beast shuddered against the rising cold. He curled himself up tighter, and plunged into a deep sleep.

And on the North American Continent black eyes saw and felt his anger. *There will be a big surprise for you when you awaken, dark one.*

James awoke early filled with excitement; he quickly dressed and went below for breakfast. Elizabeth knew how he missed his fellow riders and how much he was looking forward to seeing them again. He ate a hearty breakfast and spoke with Daniel and Michael about his coming trip.

“I figure if we leave around 8:00am, I should arrive at the castle around 4:00pm their time. It shouldn’t take long to teach them the maneuver. Then we can leave around 11:00pm their time, which would put us back here by our dinnertime. What do you think?”

“I think you’ve been thinking too much about all this. Ease up James, it will all fall into place, believe me; Valotin will know when it’s time to leave.” Daniel gently calmed James down, “the dragons have a sixth sense about timing things. Try to relax a bit, spend time with Elizabeth, enjoy.”

James took a deep breath, “I can’t fault that thinking. Thanks Daniel, sorry I was so obnoxious. I guess I’m just excited at the prospect of seeing my friends again.” James excused himself and joined Elizabeth. She asked James what kind of food she should ask Sam to prepare, and if there was anything she should know. James described them all to her, and gave her a brief description of their personalities and how they had all met.

Just then Valotin called James to the top. “Duty calls my love, see you later this afternoon.” He hurriedly grabbed his gear, and headed for the mesa top. Valotin was waiting for him along with Artiku and Keyana.

“Greeting James, Rider of Valotin, we are honored to be chosen for this service.” Keyana spoke for them both. “It should not take long to teach your friends and their dragons to master the ‘Thermals’.

James came forward and bowed slightly to Valotin then wrapped his arms partially about his friend’s neck in their usual morning greeting. *Are you ready Valotin? We are going to make history today!*

*I can feel your excitement my friend. I do not know about making history, but we are indeed going to start something.* Valotin lowered his left wing and James climbed up and made his way over to the ridges on his neck. Once seated, he took out his aviator goggles and put them on. Signaling he was ready, Valotin took to the air.

Artiku began to speak. “Ok dudes, listen up, this is really easy. We fly to the heights and a little above. When you feel the warm air hit you, you will be close. You follow the warm air current until you feel it start to pull you with it. Just let go and let it take you with it; go with the flow man! After a bit you will be able to ‘feel’ the different pathways in the current. Then it’s just a matter of taking the current in the direction you want to go. Shall we give it a try?”

Valotin nodded and followed the two Blues as they flew to the heights. As instructed he flew up above till he felt the warm air. It wasn’t long before he began to feel a pull towards the east. It was the current they wanted, so he stayed with it. He could see the Blues ahead of him gliding along within the current. He took their lead and allowed himself to be pulled along. Their speed increased at an alarming rate and they were soon speeding across the country. Valotin looked below and the countryside was a blur as they past by. Almost an hour later the Blue dragons signaled him to slowly emerge from the current and join them. Valotin took a look below and was amazed to see that they were on the east coast already.

*This is indeed a good way to travel far distances. James we are not far from our homeland. Artiku, Keyana why have you signaled us to stop?* Valotin turned to see that James was all right and his breathing was not impaired. He knew that at some heights humans found it difficult to breathe.

Artiku called to Valotin, “Just a heads up Valotin, once we leave the coast the thermals tend to get a little bumpy out there. There are a lot of currents meeting over the ocean, and violent upward thrusts of air can send a dragon shooting into the ionosphere. We almost lost Diana that way. So to counter that event, we generally go to the top of the thermal and surf straight to the other side.” Artiku was having a good time with all this as evidenced by the tone of his voice. “Oh, and it will get colder as we approach the English coast; it is winter for them and the air reflects it. It can freeze a person quickly. Perhaps James should put on a warmer jacket.”

James opened his ditty bag and pulled his heavy flight jacket out and put it on. “Ok you guys, I’m ready!”

“Great, let’s go for it,” shouted Artiku. The two Blues took off at lightening speed and soared above. Valotin was not far behind them.

*Hold on tight my friend; this may be tricky the first time we do it!* Valotin warned his lifelong companion.

“Wuuuu-haaaa!” James made his feelings known to all.



Peter and his people had awakened to a clear sky; the air was crisp and cold, all in all a beautiful day. They said little to each other and hurriedly finished a breakfast of tea and biscuits. One by one they made their rounds and did their best to get thru the morning. It seemed to take forever for the afternoon to pass.

Around teatime Alakar let out a loud roar, all heads turned in his direction.

Valotin's voice was clear in his mind, *Alakar, we are close! I can just make out the shoreline. May I have your permission to speak to the others?* Dragon etiquette required that Valotin ask permission before addressing Alakar's clan of fighters.

*Most assuredly my friend! They are anxiously awaiting your arrival.* Alakar turned and addressed his clan; *Valotin wishes to speak to you all.*

*Greetings my friends! We shall be with you shortly. It has taken us less than two hours to reach you. They tell me that the trip back will be much faster. Ah, I can see the mountains from here.*

Valotin spread his wings in a downward position, slowed his speed, and gently glided out of the thermal current. He could feel the cold air as he banked to the right and turned in the direction of the mountain range he knew was Alakar's home base. Slowly he spiraled down towards the waiting group of dragons and riders.

"Whoa, look at the size of Valotin! He's twice the size he was when he left us." Theo had put words to what they were all thinking as they watched Valotin's approach.

"I wonder if James has changed too," voiced an unsure Vail. Valotin flew over, circled, and gently glided down to a large open area.

The Blue Dragons circled the area once and shouted to the men and women below as they glided in, "Greetings dudes, the Blues have arrived!" They landed behind Valotin and bowed in respect to Alakar. "Hail Alakar, Third of the Ancients! We bring honor and salutations from our leader Wolf, of the Blue Dragon Clan."

*Your greetings are accepted and I bid you welcome to our humble camp. You have all my riders and dragons in awe of your abilities.* James relayed the message to the two blue dragons, who in turn roared 'Acceptance'.

The riders stood there wide-eyed and open-mouthed, totally stunned by these talking dragons. Terry was the first to move, he bowed to Valotin, gave a greeting, and asked permission to address these amazing creatures. He was told he needed no permission - to just talk to them. A little hesitant at first, Terry went up to Keyana, bowed and introduced himself and Sean, and then did the same to Artiku. Lady Drucilla and Delain came over and were also properly introduced. So began a friendship between these two dragon clans that would last for many long years. Terry was soon lost in conversation with Artiku. He was told their history, and promised an introduction to their 'sister' Diana, the woman who thought she was a dragon. After a bit he excused himself, and as he came over and rejoined the others he could be heard mumbling, "...fascinating, truly fascinating!"

Peter went to James and embraced him as a brother, "glad to see you my friend!" he shouted as he slapped James on the back several times. "You were always full of surprises, what a turn of events." Everyone gathered around James. The change in him was nothing short of remarkable.

He began with proper etiquette; “I would like to formally introduce you all to my friends Artiku and Keyana, of the mighty Blue Dragon Clan.” Both dragons came forward and bowed to the riders and dragons. “They have graciously agreed to come here and teach you all how ride the ‘Thermals.’ It is most exhilarating I assure you,” he said with enthusiasm.

The small band of riders and dragons circled around the two strange dragons and began asking them all kinds of questions. They learned that the Blue Dragons had flown over this area many times. Then Artiku began to instruct them one at a time, in the art of ‘Riding the Thermals’. A little over two hours later they were ready for a break. Peter and James left the others above with the Blues and went below to the kitchen area for a cup of tea.

“So James, tell me, do we really have a chance? Can we win this?” Peter was suddenly very serious.

“Oh we’ll win all right, Peter, I’ve seen it. But it will be a long hard fight, and we may lose some of our people. Jake assures me that our cause is just and we are in the light. It’s very important that we have no negativity in our ranks Peter. It sounds like a simple thing, but it carries the difference between victory and defeat.” James took a sip of his tea and continued, “You’ll understand more after you come to Dragons Hill. When you meet the people there, and see how they and their dragons are connected it will all be clear. Peter, I have learned so much there. I never realized how important we are to our dragons in battle. The intensity of their flame is measured by the connection between us and our resolve to win.”

Peter continued his conversation with James, “there is a lot of knowledge I still require James, I can see that now. Is that why Jake arranged for this trip? Ever since he made contact, I had a feeling that there was a lot more to all of this.”

“Jake will explain it all to you and Alakar after we arrive. Be patient my friend, our time is coming.” James got up and put his mug in the sink. Turning, he smiled at his longtime friend, “I can promise you this Peter, you are about to start a journey that will change our world, and put you and Alakar in the Dragon Chronicles!”

“The what...” Peter asked startled.

“The Dragon Chronicles; it’s a history book of sorts. It contains all the history of the dragons. It also contains everything that has happened in the States from the hatching of Jake to the present. Master Jeffery was a Professor of History; he started to keep a record of everything that happened. And he now keeps a running history of the dragons and all their adventures and battles. He is relentless in keeping it up date. He had me buttonholed, and drained me of every bit of knowledge I had from our part of the world. So be prepared, when Jake is finished with you, Jeffery will grab you and pump you dry.” He slapped Peter on the back, “Now my friend, lets go and see what the gods have in store for us!”

The remaining riders descended below and fixed themselves some tea. They had been informed that they would be arriving at dinnertime at Dragons Hill. James told them of the plans for a feast in their honor. They chitchatted with Peter for a while asking questions about Dragons Hill.

James sought out Vail and both men greeted each other as brothers would, a big bear hug and Vail stood back and looked at his friend. “You’ve changed for the good I think. Whoever she is, she must be one hell of a woman! I envy you my friend.”

**“Wait till you meet her Vail, she’s a remarkable woman; she...she makes me whole again.”**

**Vail could see by the look on James’s face that he was in love; something he did not see when Lady Catherine was alive.**

**After a bit Peter called the riders to attention and all went above and mounted their dragons. Alakar rose to his full height and called to his clan, *to the heights!***

**They took to the air following the two Blue Dragons. Once above, the Blues showed them the location of the Thermal current. They followed the Blue Dragons and let the current take them for a bit, and when they were confident enough they rose to the top of the Thermal wave. They were all swept away in a blinding flash and they settled themselves in for the ride. As they looked below they could make out the European continent, large areas were scorched black.**

**Peter was both elated and a bit apprehensive. He wondered in his heart if he were up to this new turn of events.**

***Why do you worry so my friend? Alakar was so tuned into his friend that he could read him like a book. You are a good man, and your heart is pure. You need not fear if you are the man for the job. Jake has great respect for you and what you have accomplished in so short a time. We have been fighting against overwhelming odds my friend, and we have been making progress. Now, like a diamond in the rough, it is time for us to be polished to a brilliant shine.***

***Thank you Alakar, you always know the right thing to say. I should not second-guess myself for I have you beside me, and there is nothing we cannot accomplish together!*** Peter told his lifelong friend.

Elizabeth had a busy day after James left the camp. She gone down and spoken with Sam and they had prepared a lavish feast for the newcomers. They would be welcomed to Dragons Hill in splendid style. She had also begged a ride from Lady Ashley to the town. Daowyn was only too pleased to aid her in her venture. She had opened up the house and laid in a supply of food. Then she had made up all the beds in the bedrooms, even putting out fresh flowers throughout the house. Kate had told her to make the house like her own, she knew these people had suffered and not enjoyed the simple pleasantries of life in a long time.

Kate and Daniel would be there to greet the riders when they arrived, but then they would turn over their well being to Elizabeth and James. Jake had explained to her the need to establish Elizabeth as a leader in their eyes. Kate was only too happy to do so as her time was in great demand caring for her small son.

Lady Valeria was growing stronger every day. She had already grown much larger, and Elizabeth could see that she was different from the other female dragons. She had long spikes on her wing tips, and huge talons on her legs. She was a warrior all right! Elizabeth could hardly contain her excitement and anticipation of 'First Flight'.

As she was taking a last look around the house she heard Jake call to her, *Lady Elizabeth they have taken to wing! They will be here soon. Are you ready to return?*

*Yes Jake, I have everything here ready for them. I am so nervous! These are James' people and I want to make a good impression. I hope I don't blow it.*

*My dear child, you are far stronger that you realize. Remember when you first came to us. Remember how you said very little, and listened to everything everyone said? I could see then the leader you would become. Jake continued to build up Elizabeth's confidence. Listen to these men and women. They have gone thru fire and come out strong. Now it is time for them to rest and regroup. Just be yourself Elizabeth; they will be impressed that James has so strong a woman by his side.*

*Thank you Jake, I needed a little encouragement. I shall do my best and let the chips fall where they may. I must return to prepare myself now. Elizabeth made her way to the front of the house.*

*Daowyn is waiting for you my Lady. Enjoy yourself and your time with James and his friends. The connection with Jake was ended.*

Elizabeth came out of the house and found Daowyn waiting on the front lawn. She bowed slightly before him and said in her sweetest voice; *Thank you Daowyn for bringing me here, and also for waiting for me. You are a wonder and such a gentleman.*

*I am pleased to be of service Lady Elizabeth. The large forest green dragon replied in a southern drawl. Does James know that you can speak to us without a go-between?*

*I am not sure Daowyn, but I shall let him know as soon as possible after he arrives. Now I must return and prepare myself. I have no idea what I should wear, but I want make a good impression, for James' sake.*

Daowyn took off and had Elizabeth back on Dragons Hill in 20 minutes. She thanked him and he wished her well in her endeavor. She went below and took a quick shower and then dressed herself in a light tan leather outfit. She put on a little bit of make-up, just some mascara and lipstick. Then she decided to braid her hair and went to Kate and begged Daniel to do it for her. He couldn't refuse when he saw how nervous she was. Twenty minutes later Elizabeth was ready. Jake called and informed them that they were 10 minutes away. Oreo arrived on cue to watch over the sleeping baby as Kate and Daniel joined Elizabeth. They all proceeded to the new mesa to greet their guests.

Steve and Jerry had prepared a large area knowing the size of the dragons soon to join them. It was a magnificent job; the area was large enough so that the dragons would be comfortable and not squeezed together. As they reached the top they could see Jake and Queenie were already there, as were Ichor and Lady Isabol, and beside them was Lady Valeria. They made an impressive sight.

Elizabeth went to Lady Valeria and greeted her friend and stood with her. Daniel and Kate joined Jake and Queenie; and Lady Sarah and Jackson came onto the mesa and went directly to Ichor and Lady Isabol.

As they looked to the east they suddenly spotted the group of large dragons coming down out of the heights.

*Good God, thought Daniel, those dragons are huge!*

*Yes Daniel, but then their enemy is huge also. Remember, these men, women and dragons have been through a terrible time. Jake reminded Daniel. They have all come out of it scarred in one way or another. But they have also become stronger for it. Take my lead my brother.*

Valotin and Alakar flew to Dragons Hill and circled once over the landing area. As leaders they landed first, followed by the Blues, and then the rest of Alakar's clan. They sat there for a moment, each looking at the other; sizing each other up so to speak. James then dismounted; Peter followed suit, as did his riders. Each stood by his or her dragon.

Valotin broke the silence by stepping forward and bowing to Jake. *Hail Jake, First of the Ancients. May I present Alakar, Third of the Ancients, and his rider, Peter.*

Alakar bowed as did Peter. Then Alakar spoke for them all. *We thank you Jake for your foresight in inviting us to your hold. May I introduce my dragons and their riders?*

Jake nodded and bowed slightly. *I would be most pleased to meet your mighty band of fighters Alakar. I know of their courage and might in battle; and I am honored that you graciously accepted my invitation.*

Alakar proceeded to name his dragons and their riders. Each stepped forward and bowed as their name was called. When he was finished Jake introduced Queenie, and then he turned to Daniel and Kate and introduced them. He then turned and introduced Ichor and Lady Isabol and their riders, Lady Sarah and Jackson. There was some surprise at a woman riding Ichor, an Ancient! Valotin stepped to Lady Valeria's side and introduced her to them all. They could see that she was indeed a warrior Queen. Tho' newly hatched, she had the beginnings of spikes on her wings that warrior queens are noted for; they were also noted for their great ferocity. James then went forward and took Elizabeth's hand in his and introduced her to them. Several nodded assent and smiled.

Jake called to Alakar and his dragons. *My First Wing, Rah, flies overhead. I have asked him to escort you and your dragons to our feeding grounds. The herds are full and in need of culling. Do you think you and your dragons might aid us in this deed?*

Alakar chuckled and accepted gladly for his dragons. The large dragons bid his or her rider farewell and good feasting and took to the air. Alakar bowed and thanked Jake for his generosity.

Daniel stepped forward and bowed to Alakar and asked to speak to his riders. Alakar was impressed with Daniel's knowledge of dragon etiquette and nodded his head in assent telling him this was his camp and he was free to speak to whomever he chose. He then excused himself and took to the air.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I bid you all welcome to Dragons Hill. On behalf of the men and women in the camp below, you are all most welcome. We hope that your stay with us will be a pleasant one. Lady Elizabeth has had a special feast prepared for you all. I leave you in her capable hands." Daniel turned with a wave of his arm in Lady Elizabeth's direction. He gave her a wink and told them he would see them all below later; he had duties to attend to before the feast.

Jake went forward to the Blue dragons and thanked them for their help. They were very matter of fact about it, said they made new friends and enjoyed themselves. Jake told them they were most welcome to join the others in the feeding grounds. The Blues said they would enjoy that and left to join the other dragons.

Jake turned his head in Lady Elizabeth direction, *now it is time for you to assume your duties as a leader's mate Elizabeth. I have great confidence in you!*

*Thanks Jake, I can take from here, you taught me well!*

Elizabeth waited till Jake flew off. She then turned to James, and giggling she jumped into his arms wrapping her legs about him, and kissed him passionately.

Reggie and Lady Cynthia whistled and clapped their hands loudly.

The others joined in just as loudly, and Terry shouted out "the Lady is in the house!" Elizabeth blushed and let go of James, gesturing, she bid them to follow her.

"Please come with me my new friends, follow me down to a temporary rest area we have prepared for this night." Elizabeth showed them the stairway leading down into the mountain. "I hope to get to know each one of you during the next few weeks. Tomorrow morning we will go to the house in the country," she told them, "you'll all love it there."

They followed a pathway down inside the mountain that ended in a large archway; a huge room opened up before them. James immediately saw that Elizabeth and Steve and Jerry had been very busy while he was gone. The cave was enormous; carpets had been laid on the floors, a large table with eight chairs was off to one side. There were several leather couches and overstuffed chairs set about the room to form several sitting areas. James could see that many alcoves had been made for sleeping quarters for the riders.

"Please settle yourselves for a bit, I know you all must have questions." Elizabeth beckoned them to sit for a moment. "I thought you might want to freshen up before we descend to the great hall."

Several of the riders claimed their alcoves and dumped their luggage unceremoniously on the bed. Vail came over to Elizabeth and taking her hand he introduced himself with a flourish.

“Madame you are enchanting,” winking he looked towards James and continued, “Now we know why you stayed so long James, it seems the States have many delightful treasures.” Vail then bowed and kissed Elizabeth’s hand.

“You can knock that off right now, it won’t work on Elizabeth. She’ll see right thru you Vail old man!” James was enjoying the banter between himself and Vail once again.

“Alas my good sir,” began Elizabeth, “I fear you will sweep the ladies here off their feet with your gallantry.”

“Ah,” Vail quickly countered, “but not you my good woman?”

“My heart belongs to James, besides, I wouldn’t want to deprive the good ladies here of your charms,” cooed Elizabeth.

“You warned her about me didn’t you James,” demanded Vail.

“Oh give it up Vail; I apologize for this aristocratic bore Lady Elizabeth,” Reggie bellowed as he cut in between the two, “he’s really so full of himself. My name is Reggie; and this lovely beauty by my side is Lady Cynthia, my better half.”

“I am most pleased to meet you Elizabeth.” She opened her arms and gave Elizabeth a big hug. “Just ignore these two; they go at each other all the time. So tell me, what is all this about?”

“Jake felt that with the black bull snowed in for the winter, it would be a perfect time for our two clans to meet and enjoy some down time.” Elizabeth explained, “The devils here have been destroyed, except for a few here and there. We hunt them down and destroy them as soon as we find them. The people are beginning to return to the various towns and have accepted us completely.”

“Jolly good for you! We haven’t been able to find anyone.” Reggie interjected, “We know they are out there somewhere, but they are still too afraid of the dragons, good or bad.”

Terry came over to Elizabeth and introduced himself. “If you can handle Vail, you should have no problem with the black devils. My word, you are a beauty, woman! Sean, come here and meet Lady Elizabeth properly.”

Sean let out a hearty laugh and came over to them. He introduced himself and gave Elizabeth a huge bear hug. Elizabeth laughed and hugged them both back and that small act signaled to them both her acceptance of them.

Peter came over and introduced Lady Cicely. “We shall get along just fine my dear. You must have gone to a lot of trouble to fix this place up for us. My, my, it’s like a palace. We are very grateful.”

“I just wanted us to meet in a relaxed setting. Tomorrow, when we go the house, you will be able to go shopping at the warehouses. Whatever you may need in clothing, shoes, whatever, you can find it all at the warehouses. You’ll find it quite a lot of fun,” Elizabeth explained. “We also have quite a selection of food in the freezer. We can draw up a menu and take turns cooking.”

“Shopping?” Terry’s voice went up an octave. “Dear woman, did you really say shopping? Elizabeth nodded, and Terry’s face lit up. “Oh my, did you hear Sean, God how long has it been? New clothes, shoes that actually fit ...”

**“How about weapons, do you have weapons?” asked Reggie.**

**“Yes, many crossbows and rifles are in the warehouse. I’d like to point out that Jake trained us in the use of crossbows as we fought.” Eyes went wide as she continued and said nonchalantly, “We took out the eyes of the beasts and the dragons did the rest.”**

**Steve came into the cave, “Well hello to you all, I’m Steve, rider of Lady Elsbeth.” He looked around at all of them, “so how do you like the digs?” he gestured with his hands.**

**James came over and explained to them that Steve was the demolitions expert of Dragons Hill. He had made all the caves here, and was one of the first dragon riders on the hill.**

**He was quickly surrounded and questions were thrown at him. After about a half hour James called them all to attention and suggested they go below for dinner. As they were getting ready to leave Oreo came wandering into the cave.**

**“Bloody hell!” screamed Lady Cynthia.**

**“It’s all right, it’s all right!” Steve yelled immediately as several reached for the knives they carried at their belts, “she’s one of us!” He knelt down and Oreo came over and brushed up against him purring loudly. “This is Oreo.”**

**Fascinated, Terry came over immediately. “May I touch her?” he asked a little hesitantly.**

**“Just kneel down and talk to her, she understands what we say completely. She is Lady Sally’s cat; she – uh - was enhanced at the hatching of Rah, Lady Sally’s dragon. Many people owe their lives to her - as well as Jake’s Queen. Just let her smell you, Terry.”**

**Terry held out his hand and Oreo came over to him. Her size was amazing he thought as she leaned into him knocking him over. He laughed and sat up and began to scratch her around her big neck; her fur was silky soft and she purred loudly.**

**“You are gorgeous darling, do you know that?” Oreo meowed loudly and rubbed herself against him. “My lord,” he exclaimed, “she is an absolute Diva. She’s the size of a tiger!”**

**Sean came over and knelt down beside Terry, petting her also. He looked up at Steve, “How?” he asked.**

**“Several of us have pets, and during the developing egg stage we let our pets hover over the eggs, even sleep with them during the day and night. At hatching, they are enhanced along with the riders; as a result most of them doubled or tripled in size. Lady Emily has a falcon; you should see Lancelot now! He flies night patrol with the dragons.”**

**“Bloody good show!” Peter exclaimed, “This is unbelievable; you chaps are so far ahead of us. Damn we’re like children compared to you.”**

**“That’s why you are all here; rest for a week and then Dragon 101 begins.” James said gently, “right now let's go down and stuff our faces!”**



Elizabeth had been quietly going about the room to each couple introducing herself to them and having a few words. She came to Theodore and Lady Susanna, introduced herself, and received a big hug in return.

“I am very excited that you are all here,” she told them. Linking their arms with hers she tugged them along with her, “come on, lets go eat!”

As they made their way down the mountainside the English riders got a good view of the camp. They were amazed at the many dragons flying overhead; and impressed with the size of the camp. As they reached the bottom, they saw Brutus and Cesar making their way to the mess hall.

Steve gave them a brief history of how they arrived at Dragons Hill. They all agreed this was just too much to take in at one time. Up ahead they could see several people rushing into a huge cave. James and Steve led them in that direction. They entered the cave and asked Steve if he did this too. He laughed and replied no, only enlarged it. Wonderful aromas assaulted their noses and pleasant sounds erupted from the group.

As they rounded the last corner they could see that it opened up into a gigantic cave. There were at least 200 people standing there. Kate and Daniel were standing in front, and the most beautiful and stunning people that they had ever seen surrounded them. It was obvious that these must be the riders of Dragons Hill.

Suddenly the room exploded with “Welcome to Dragons Hill!” There was loud clapping from the entire crowd of people, some cheered.

The newcomers were astounded by the welcome. Kate and Daniel stepped forward and took Peter and Lady Cicely, along with James and Elizabeth to a table. James reached out and tugged Vail along with them. The rest of the riders all surged forward. Introducing themselves each grabbed two of the newcomers and made for a table. Lady Sally and Michael along with Lady Emily and Andrew grabbed Terry and Sean and made for a large table. Steve and Lady Ashley grabbed Theo and Susanna and headed for a table with Lady Beth and Jerry in tow. It was Jackson and Lady Sarah who locked onto Reginald and Lady Cynthia and propelled them to another table.

Sam came out of the kitchen and introduced himself to them all laughing heartily. Then he called for silence and everyone joined hands, and a Prayer of Thanks was said. After the prayer he turned and called for the servers to begin the feast. Tables were laden with huge platters of chicken, steak, and pork chops; fresh vegetables; steaming bowls of mashed potatoes, and of course gravy; ice tea and soft drinks were also laid out. Biscuits and honey were overflowing on each table; Sam had outdone himself.

Times had been so lean for these good people that the sight of all this food was almost too much to bear. Terry had tears in his eyes as he hesitantly reached for a chicken quarter, and then saw everyone taking a sample of all the meats on the table.

Lady Sally, guessing what he was thinking, gently touched Terry’s arm, “it’s ok Terry, there is plenty, take as much as you want. We know it has been a long struggle and you all have suffered greatly. This feast is for you. Enjoy it!”

That was all the coaxing he needed. He dug in with gusto and filled his plate to overflowing. He then did the same for Sean’s plate. Conversations were going on at all the tables; little bits of knowledge were floating about the huge cavern and being taken in on all levels.

Peter looked at all the sumptuous food, and at his people enjoying it all. He said a private prayer of thanks for this good luck. Lady Cicely was deep in conversation with Lady Kate and she had a look of supreme happiness on her face. Daniel caught a glimpse of Peter looking about and correctly figured out that Peter was feeling fulfilled to see his people beaming with such happiness.

“Peter, dig in and enjoy. Please, we have plenty and this feast is in your honor,” Daniel assured him. “I can only imagine how lean times have been for you all, so please enjoy it man! There will be plenty of time for conversation later.”

“Daniel, please, I... I am just overwhelmed by all this,” Peter answered with a wave of his hand. “It has been so long since we didn’t have to think about stretching our food stores out to last. Jake was right in bringing us here; we have been too long in isolation and need.”

Peter then stood with his plate in his hand and proceeded to fill it up. As he ate he scanned the entire room locating where each of his riders were at the different tables around the hall. Faces were being stuffed and many were deep in conversation; but they were all relaxed, and happy.

Across the room Terry was still stuffing his face when he remembered what Steve had said about Lady Sally being Oreos owner. “Excuse me, Lady Sally; I met your pet Oreo just before we came down. She’s absolutely marvelous! It’s just so hard to believe that she’s only a cat. She’s so friendly, and so powerful; I mean her size is such a marvel.”

“She’s my friend Terry, is it all right if I call you Terry? I don’t think of her as a pet. Besides, she belongs to all of us now.”

Lady Sally then began to tell Terry and Sean the story of the Hatching Grounds battle and all that occurred. There was an awkward moment when she recounted the death of Ash, and then complete surprise when Sally told of the emergence of Lady Emily’s dragon, Ash.

“Do you mean Ash came back as a dragon?” Eyes wide Terry looked at Lady Emily and waited for an answer.

“Yes, I believe so. He has retained many of the memories and only needs a little prompting to bring them into focus.” Lady Emily continued, “When I brought Oreo and Tabs to meet him, he seemed to recognize them and greeted them like old friends. Oreo says that she can see Ash in the dragon’s eyes.”

“Wait, wait a minute, you can speak to Oreo?” Terry was beside himself at this bit of news.

“Rah speaks to Oreo and relays what she says. It’s on a different level,” Lady Sally was gesturing with her hands, “something they formed during the egg stage when they were together for long periods of time. Her perceptions are a little different than ours, very truthful I think. She makes herself understood, believe me.”

“Amazing, truly amazing! Why this is absolutely great news; we have two large Wolfhounds back home. They wandered into our camp several months ago and I’ve sort of taken them in. They’re very protective, and they seem to sense when the black devils are in the area. They often lay on the ridge during the day watching our dragons go thru all their routines and exercises. They don’t seem to have bonded to any one dragon yet.”

**“I believe it has to take place during the egg stage Terry, but I could ask Rah what he thinks when he returns, if you like,” offered Sally.**

**“Oh yes, please Lady Sally.” Terry gave her his best smile. Sean gave him an elbow to the ribs.  
“What?”**

**“Give the lady a break Terry,” Sean replied, “we just bloody got here!”**

**“It’s okay Sean, we’ll find out before you return,” Michael added, “maybe your dogs have bonded to all the dragons. Ask your dragons about it, they would know?”**

**Similar conversations were taking place all over the great hall. Everyone was enjoying the camaraderie. Peter began to see that there was a lot he had to learn about running a camp and this was the training ground. He had a feeling that Jake was doing the same with their dragons at the feeding grounds.**

**“So Peter,” began James, “do you feel it yet?”**

**“Ah, I think I know what you’re referring to James,” Peter looked at his old friend with new respect, “some sense of contentment, peace I believe. Yes, there is definitely something here.”**

**Vail was busy trying to charm Lady Elizabeth off her feet. He was having no luck; *not only is she beautiful, but also very down to earth, no false airs, just complete honesty, quite refreshing! James is a very lucky man. Perhaps ...*, he thought.**

**James leaned over and asked his friend, “So Vail, what do you think of Elizabeth?”**

**“I think you are one lucky bastard! You always manage to land on your feet, James. It must be your positive outlook on everything,” Vail slapped his friend on the shoulder, “I just hope some of that luck rubs off on me.”**

**Lady Sarah and Jackson had made instant friends with Reggie and Lady Cynthia. Their personalities were similar, and Sarah recognized a kindred spirit in Reggie. But where she had found a way to turn that anger to positive thought; Reggie still used it to channel and fuel his fight with the black devils. He would learn while he was at Dragons Hill how to redirect that anger Sarah was sure. He was probably a formidable fighter.**

**Reggie was going on and on about Sarah riding Ichor, a male dragon, an Ancient! Lady Cynthia was trying to tell him to stop, “Reggie, give it a break, please!”**

**“But she’s a woman, a woman riding an Ancient into war!” He was just amazed that she was strong enough to give strength to Ichor’s flame. She assured him that she could. Then she explained to him that the connection between rider and dragon made the difference; and she would match flame with him anytime. He had a feeling that he would lose that match if he dared to take her up on it.**

**“No disrespect was intended Lady Sarah. It just takes some getting used to, that’s all! I apologize if I offended you.” Reggie said contritely.**

**“Reggie, I took no offence. I knew you meant no harm. You will learn while you are here, and then you will understand.” Sarah smiled and continued eating.**

**About two hours later people started to leave the hall. It was time to call an end to this little gathering. The newcomers were getting tired and sleepy as their bodies were still on their home time schedule. Peter called them together and James and Elizabeth showed them the way back. They bid them good night and headed towards their own cave. An hour later as they lay in each other's arms happy and contented. Their future was starting to look pretty good.**

**And in the feeding grounds, Valotin could be heard chuckling loudly.**

The next morning several of the riders did indeed sleep in. About noon, they gathered together and headed for the house in town. Everyone was delighted with the little town and the huge house on the hill. They settled themselves in and then Elizabeth took them all shopping in the warehouses; it was a field day for them - they regressed into children. They were sorely in need of clothes, shoes, and toilet items. They were happy as larks going thru the warehouses and picking things out.

Terrance particularly was in seventh heaven. He filled a large box with cooking spices and items he sorely needed. He also picked out several new sets of pots and pans and cooking utensils. He called Peter over and asked him if he thought that they might find a similar facility in Scotland, or perhaps somewhere near London. They decided to make it a priority to locate one when they returned.

The ladies were also having a good time:

“Oh look, shampoo! You have no idea how long it has been.”

“Ah, bathing gel! And in different scents too!”

“Oh look, hand lotion, and deodorant, and tooth paste! Oh yes!”

“I picked up several bath towels; it’s going to be great to actually soak in a tub for awhile!”

“Ladies and gentlemen, I recommend that you also pick up one of the large duffle bags at the end of aisle 17.” James informed them, “I can guarantee that it will hold all your things, and also be easy for your dragons to carry on the trip back.”

Several hours later they returned to the house loaded down with their booty. They carefully carried their treasures in and went to their rooms to inspect it all. James settled himself outside on the back porch, got himself a beer, and sat back. Vail joined him shortly after, and he offered his friend one. They sat back together and enjoyed the sounds of the afternoon. They could hear Elizabeth in the kitchen humming a tune while she prepared lunch for the group.

“Mmm ... soothing, and I might add, very sensual. You’re a lucky man my friend.” Vail had a way about him that most found annoying, but James wasn’t bothered by his manner. That was one of things that Vail liked about him; he could be himself with James.

“This is sort of surreal you know?” Vail sat forward, resting his arms on his knees, “don’t get me wrong ole boy, I mean I have just spent the better part of two hours indulging myself to the bloody max. But somehow it felt ... just wrong – you know? Damn, it’s just too crazy.”

“It’s okay Vail; that was one of the things that was so hard for me when I first came here. It’s a common after-effect of going thru the fire, so-to-speak.” James took a long swig of his beer. “It would be nice if things could be like this always.”

Elizabeth came out to the porch with a can of diet Coke. She took a long drink and belched loudly as she stood in the doorway. Quickly her hand went to her mouth as Vail laughed.

“Good lord - excuse me,” she said as she covered her mouth, red with embarrassment.

Vail was amused at her plight, “Now that is what is missing from my life, dear lady. Please, think nothing of it, just wait till Reg and Cyn get started, they are notorious. And I won’t even mention Theo and Sean; they have an on-going battle of the belches. Besides, it’s a sign of good food!”

**“You are just being kind Vail, but thank-you any way. Would either of you gentlemen be interested in a sandwich? I have all kinds of meats and cheeses, with all the condiments, I might add.” Smiling sweetly Elizabeth went over to James and sat on the arm of his chair. Unconsciously he slipped his arm about her.**

**“Elizabeth, are there anymore like you about. I should like to find a mate of my own, I think. Perhaps here is where I will find her.” Vail was being sarcastic.**

**Ignoring him, Elizabeth’s answer wiped the smirk right off his face, “Jake is checking on that for me right now, Vail.” She smiled sweetly as his face went pale.**

**Just then the others started to come out onto the porch. They had all showered and changed their clothes. Each grabbed something to drink and came out and sat about on the porch.**

**“It’s wonderful to have new clothes.” Lady Cynthia was enjoying the feel of new clothes; “it’s been a long time since we had anything new.” She raised her beer to Elizabeth and took a swig. “This is the life!” They were leaning back, sitting about the porch on several of the lounging chairs, finally letting go, finally relaxing.**

**Reggie sat up and asked, “so... when do we get an idea of what is really going on here James?”**

**“Aw Reg,” several echoed together, “Give it a rest man!”**

**“Hey, I just want to know what to expect. Blow off, man!” he retorted quickly.**

**James held up his hands, “its all right chaps, really, it’s ok.” He turned towards Reggie and looked him in the eye. “We can get this over now; you want to know why you have all been called here?” Several heads nodded, all eyes and ears were on James. “You were all brought here for the reason stated; rest and healing. Healing of the soul, and of the spirit. You’ve all been thru a lot. But you’re right Reggie, there is more.”**

**“See, I told you; nothing is free, there is always a catch,” Reggie shouted triumphantly.**

**“Oh shush, I want to hear this you big lout,” Lady Cynthia admonished him.**

**James smiled, and turning to Elizabeth he winked, “Now it’s your turn my love...”**

**Vail caught the look of love and admiration in James eyes. There was a connection between these two that transcended to a level he was not privy to. He felt a twinge of jealousy at such closeness, and guilt for feeling it. He had never found anyone who could complete him. Not one of the Lady’s or Dame’s of aristocratic breeding his father had thrown at him. Oh, he had enjoyed their charms for a time, but it never lasted long. He doubted he would ever find someone the way the others had. No, the ladies of his age were gone, and no matter what Elizabeth had said, he was convinced he was doomed to be alone.**

**But he couldn’t help but feel pride at what James had found. He had always thought of him as a brother, they shared some kind of unspoken connection, and he was grateful for it. There was nothing he wouldn’t do for his friend.**

Elizabeth, standing between James and Vail, began; “what James told you is true. You were all brought here for rest and healing; but there is more. Because of the nature of your plight and the lateness of your entrance into this battle of evil - you were never able to meet with Jake and receive ‘full knowledge’. A necessity if you hope to win this fight. That knowledge is being given to your dragons even now as we speak.” Everyone sat upright – now she had their undivided attention.

“They are learning and healing and growing at the feeding grounds. All of this will be shared with you when they return. You’re all going to take another ‘First Ride’.”

She looked at all their anxious faces and continued.

“But this one will be different from all others. You have all mentioned that the riders here were a beautiful sight and that they seemed to have a ‘glow’ about them. You too will become like them – Riders of Light! You will have a closer connection with your dragon, and with each other. This isn’t something that can be put into words it’s something that has to be experienced. We will win this war; Valotin and Jake have seen it.”

Elizabeth had a glow about her as she spoke and each rider knew that what she was saying was truth. She turned and smiling, looked at James, “would you like to continue?”

Smiling, James now rose, “after you have rested and healed and enjoyed yourselves again; we will begin. There will be training on a different level, different maneuvers and a totally different fighting style. Each of you will become a fighting force to be reckoned with; you will all be more than you are now.”

“Valotin and I plan to go to the coast of Peru and settle there for the duration of the European winter. There he will mate with Lady Valeria and the eggs she produces will have a chance to mature properly. There is a community of retired civil workers there. Spies if you will, that have finished their service to their respective countries. CIA, MI5, KGB, Moussad, ChiKin, all very valuable people. Yes, they are advanced in age, but then Kate is 81 years old by real time calculations.”

There were several ‘no’s and my word’s’.

James continued, “I’d say she looks pretty damn good. Enhancement will bring these people back to their 40’s once again. Jake has seen to it that they have been receiving ‘the dreams’; the true riders will emerge and be waiting for us when we arrive.”

Peter quickly asked, “Are we to return to Scotland, or go with you?”

“I believe Valotin and Alakar are deciding that together. They will let us know what plan they decide on when they return. Now that is enough of ‘business’ talk. You were brought here to rest and relax. Sleep as late as you want; sleep all day if you want! There is a fitness center in the town, I’ll provide a map if you’d like. It has a rather large swimming pool, and a rather nice running track. There is a large Library, a Cinema, and the countryside is rather beautiful; excellent for long walks if you are so inclined. There are DVD’s here, and plenty of movies stored in the warehouses. I only ask that we all join together for evening meals, and take turns preparing them.”

“Excellent! I’m dying to get into that marvelous kitchen,” Terry exclaimed, “prepare your palates chaps, I going to fix us a sumptuous feast.”

“Now my Terry is happy again,” said Sean looking at his partner with great affection, “give him a properly stocked kitchen and he’s in heaven. Nothing gives him so much pleasure as to prepare a delectable delight for his friends.”

“I love you too big guy,” Terry said softly.

The next morning Vail arose early feeling rested and refreshed; a first for him. He decided to go for a walk thru the town. He grabbed a copy of the map and headed out. He was enjoying the quaintness of the little hamlet. He spied the Library up ahead and decided to go in.

*Maybe they have some maps of Peru, the coastline and the area around Machu Picchu. Can't hurt to look, not like I have anything else to do,* he thought to himself.

Vail climbed the stairs and opened the door to the marble entryway of the main room. He went down a hallway and it led to a large open area. *Nice touch,* he thought as he looked around the place. He went to the card index files and found that maps were all on the second floor. As he climbed the stairs he surveyed his surroundings. The library was constructed to be an open air-type of place; large floor to ceiling windows allowed the light to penetrate for optimum effect. Several couches and armchairs were set about in open areas under the many large windows at the end of long aisles of books. He looked about and found the section that he was looking for; it contained large books of maps. He chose one for South America and carefully pulled it out and placed it on one of the long tables. He opened it and hunted about and found Peru; then he began to narrow down his search. Suddenly he heard a noise behind him and turned quickly.

“Who’s there?” He looked about scanning the entire area, “I say Reggie, is that you? If you’re playing one of your games I am not amused!”

A soft voice answered him, “it is not one of your friends sir; I guess I didn’t expect to find anyone in the Library.” She slowly came out of the shadows and moved towards the brightly lit landing, “I’m sorry if I startled you,” she said softly.

As she stepped into the sunlight, Vail’s eyes went wide and he held his breath. He was stunned, thunder-struck at the sight before him. Gold and white hair cascaded about her head and gave the impression of a halo. She was dressed in a white linen blouse and large billowing pants. The sunlight behind her perfectly out lined her body. Her eyes were green pools that held him riveted to the spot. For the first time in his life, Vail the smart-ass, Vail the womanizer, was dumbstruck.

“Ah...um...” He couldn’t think, couldn’t speak; he could barely breathe. Seeing his distress the woman went to him and placed her hand on his shoulder, and at the same time she gave him a smart slap on the back with her other hand.

“Awk..caugh...ugh...” Vail stepped back, raised his hands and shook his head, “I’m all right! Really, I’m ok; you just caught me by surprise for a minute there. I say, are you real?”

She laughed and her whole face lit up. Vail found the change remarkable; he stood there transfixed to the spot, starrng at her like a schoolboy. He finally pulled himself together and bowed slightly.

“Please excuse my boorish behavior madam; but I find angels appearing suddenly out of the blue tend to take my breath away.”

“Gallantry!” she smiled, “Well now I have heard everything. I assure you sir I am no vision. May I help you in some way? What are you looking for?” She stepped closer and peered at the maps on the table. Vail explained what he was looking for, and why.

“Machu Picchu! Oh, I know the area quite well. I was an archeologist before the burning, and I’ve visited there many times.”



She turned and went down one of the aisles and returned with a very large book slamming it down on the table.

"The community you speak of is still there. The ladies and gentlemen are rather up in age, but they are a wealth of information. Cultured, intelligent, they have a great capacity for compassion. They are much loved by the native population near their community. There is much I could share with your friend about the area."

"I say, could you return to the house with me, you could dine with us this evening and James would be delighted to find someone who knows the area." Vail watched as she suddenly became quiet, all the light seemed to drain out of her eyes. He thought maybe he had offended her in some way. "Please, if I said something wrong I apologize. I'm afraid I got too enthusiastic, I didn't mean to frighten you."

"You have done nothing wrong. I, I just haven't wanted to be around people for some time now. I'm here as Jake's guest, to rest and heal." She steered him down the stairs and out of the library.

"Would you care to walk with me for a little while, I enjoy afternoon walks." Vail took her arm and readily agreed.

He studied her face; she was definitely older than he, with tiny little lines about her mouth and at the corners of her eyes. For some reason it didn't seem to matter to him. She was very intelligent, and fast on the uptake. And the sound of her voice was both mesmerizing and familiar at the same time. Every now and then as they talked, he could see a certain sadness spread over her face; he found himself wanting to take it away.

This was totally unlike the Vail everyone knew. He normally went after impressionable young women, lithe of body and mind. He would use their bodies, and take what he wanted, and then discard them quickly. He found his title allowed him to enjoy quite a lot of these young ladies. But in later years, before the burning, he found them void and lacking. He made a point of trying to search for someone he could be comfortable with; an intelligent woman he could speak with about a variety of subjects. Someone he could share his life with, but he never found her. Now, years later, this woman appears out of nowhere and Vail found himself drawn to her like a moth to a flame.

They spent the afternoon slowly wandering all over the town. She filled him in on little tidbits of information about the countryside, the weather in the area, and of course stories of Jake. Vail was happy to just listen; he barely realized where they were going, or where they had been.

He found himself opening up and telling her of his home, his aristocratic back round, and the rigid and cold upbringing of his father after his mother's death. The slow terrible realization that no matter what he did - he would never be good enough for his father. He told her of the endless parade of ladies of 'good breeding' his father sent his way. And then one night his father delivered the ultimate humiliation, choose one of these ladies and marry and produce an heir; or he would cut Vail out of his will. He told her of his reaction to his father's demand - total disgust, terrible hurt, and then rebellion. He left his ancestral home, striking out on his own. He never saw or spoke to his father again. He found himself pouring out things he had never told anyone before; things he barely allowed himself to think about. Suddenly the afternoon was gone, and he knew he had to leave her and return to the house.

"If you bring your friend to the Library tomorrow morning Vail, I would be happy to tell him what I know. There are many photos of the area that I could show him." She looked at Vail expectantly, waiting for his reply.

“Yes, yes James and Elizabeth would like that. You don’t mind? Really, I don’t want to put you out or make you uncomfortable.” Vail was searching for a reason to stay. He didn’t want to leave her just yet. “You won’t just disappear on me now will you?”

“There you go turning my head again. I shall be there, I promise. Now you had better leave me here and return to your friends, I imagine that they are worried about you.”

She smiled sweetly at him, and he thought it best that he take her advice, and left quickly. He hadn’t gone 30 feet when he realized that he didn’t know her name. He turned to ask her, but she was gone. He looked about but she disappeared. He returned to the house walking slowly, replaying the entire day in his mind.

Amanda watched him go, sad and elated at the same time. *Funny fellow, yet so familiar somehow, can’t put my finger on it...* And then her thoughts took her once again back to the place she was avoiding all day. Back to that dark black pit of emptiness, that black prison that would hold her and pull her down into its despairing depths. She tried so hard to fill her time with things to keep herself busy, but it would rear it’s head and envelope her before she could stop it. The pain was unbearable. Jake said it would get better in time; that she had to conquer it before she could move on. She began to realize that she really didn’t want to move on. At times she wallowed in it, letting it permeate her whole being; it was the only way she could remember her.

Across town Vail returned to the house and noticed Elizabeth on the front porch. As he came up the stairs he could see there was a look of great concern on her face, he went to her. “Elizabeth, is everything all right?”

“Yes Vail, but James and I must have a word with you in private. Would you walk with me to the Gazebo in the garden?”

Elizabeth went through the house and out the back porch with Vail following behind her. As they passed thru the kitchen, Vail waved to Terry who was busy with preparations for the night’s dinner. He actually smiled and shocked the hell out Terry. Elizabeth headed for the large Gazebo in the center of the garden; Vail saw that James was already there, waiting for them.

Vail panicked for a moment in obvious alarm, “has something happened to Essex?”

“No my friend, Essex is just fine. This concerns the woman you spent the afternoon with. Did she tell you anything about herself?”

*James is fishing for information, but why?* Suddenly Vail wanted to know more about this woman.

“What’s going on James, Elizabeth is obviously upset. Did I do something wrong? I assure you I left her quite well, and she promised to meet us tomorrow morning at the Library.” He looked at them both. “She’s delightful and very knowledgeable about Peru and also the area you were telling us about last night. She was an archeologist before the burning; she knows all about where you’re going James.” He looked back and forth at each of them, “I went to the library to look at some maps of the area and sort of bumped into her.”

“Vail, you were gone all day, where were you?” Elizabeth asked.

**“Oh, we just sort of walked about, talking about almost everything. She’s very charming, and she actually had a picnic basket with her. We had peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch with some cold tea. Can you imagine me eating peanut butter and jelly?” He was smiling remembering and both Elizabeth and James could see he was taken with the woman.**

**As they watched his whole demeanor suddenly changed, he had a hard look to his face, “now why in blazes the third degree? Come on, what the hell is this all about James?”**

**Elizabeth smiled with relief, “did she tell you anything about herself, Vail? Maybe why she was here?”**

**“Just that she was a guest of Jake’s,” he replied, “that she was here for rest and healing.”**

**Vail looked at James with a furrowed brow, “come on James, out with it, what’s going on? I didn’t touch her James, I assure you. I didn’t even get her name!”**

**“Calm down Vail, it’s all right,” James patted his friend on the shoulder. “I just never thought that you would run into her.”**

**“Vail,” Elizabeth cut in, “come over here and sit by me.” He did as she requested and Elizabeth took his hand in hers and continued.**

**“Her name is Amanda; she’s been thru a terrible ordeal, Vail. Jake found her half-mad wandering in the desert. It took a long time but he managed to get thru to her and calm her. He also got some information out of her. She had been wandering the country alone after the burning when she stumbled upon an egg. She feared that people wouldn’t understand; that they would try to destroy it. So she hid in some caves and took care of it. Well it seems that it had just hatched when the black devils burst into the cave and ripped it pieces. It died protecting her. You can imagine what it did to her; she almost lost her mind.”**

**Vail’s eyes grew wide, “Oh my lord!” He could only imagine the horror of loosing Essex in such a manner.**

**Elizabeth placed her hand on Vail’s arm, “so you see, she’s in a very fragile state. Jake brought her here to the town to try to heal her. She’s been here about 3 months. She keeps to herself quite a bit. This is the first time she has spoken with anyone. I hope you understand our alarm. It was nothing against you; you do understand don’t you?”**

**“No, I don’t.” He looked at Elizabeth and rose; she could see that his feelings were obviously hurt. “I mean, I was very much the gentleman, I did nothing wrong. We just talked and walked, she’s delightful company.”**

**Vail smiled remembering how easy it was to talk with her. Elizabeth caught that look and then she understood – he was smitten. “Now that I think about it, there was a moment, just briefly I assure you, that a look came over her. It was so sad. I..I found myself wanting to make it go away. I can’t explain it.”**

**“Vail, may Jake speak to you?” Vail knew this was required dragon etiquette, but it must be important if Jake was in on this conversation.**

**“Of course,” he retorted defensively in his mind, *Jake I assure you, I was a perfect gentleman.***

***I know you were Vail. She was very happy spending time with you. I believe your not knowing who she was made it easier for her. She was relaxed in your company, and this was very good. Jake explained further, I should like to ask you to continue to be her friend. That is if you do not mind.***

***Mind! I would be delighted Jake, she is a remarkable woman. I found myself very comfortable with her; it was so easy to talk to her. Grinning, Vail remembered the afternoon.***

***Good! Then continue, meet her tomorrow morning. Find out what you need to know James, but keep off the subject of dragons if possible. Try to draw her out; yet do not push any subject that she shies away from. She is looking forward to seeing you again tomorrow, Vail. This is a major improvement in her healing.***

***Elizabeth told me what happened to her, Jake. If I can help her, in any way, I will. Vail volunteered eagerly.***

***The process takes time for the human mind to heal from such a blow. She is making progress, but Vail; she must come to terms with the death of her dragon, Jake emphasized the point. I shall leave you now, duty calls. By the way Vail, Essex sends his regards and hopes you are well.***

***Thank you Jake, please give him my best. I miss him quite a bit. The connection was broken.***

**“Well this changes things a bit. I had no idea she had been through so much.” Vail looked at James and very softly he continued, “I know this may sound corny but, I could spend a lifetime with a woman like that, she is so ... so unlike any woman I have ever met.”**

**Elizabeth looked at Vail with new respect. She could see on his face what she had seen on James’ face when they first met. Silently she thought, *maybe Vail has found his mate after all. Time would tell if she were right.***

**As they headed back towards the house they could hear music blaring loudly. Terry was in the kitchen cooking up a culinary delight, happy as could be. Reggie and Cynthia were in the large living room dancing to the music, and Theo and Susanna were clapping and laughing loudly. Elizabeth and James joined in the dancing and Vail went to the bar and poured himself a drink. Smiling he watched them for a while and then slipped outside to the front porch. His mind was racing with thoughts of seeing her again.**

***Amanda! So that’s your name my angel!***

**As he looked towards the town, he could make out a light in one of the houses down there. He knew she was in that house, alone with her thoughts.**

**Perhaps he could change that, *maybe ... just maybe...!***

Amanda awoke feeling happy and well rested. She was actually looking forward to seeing Vail again. She had really enjoyed spending time with him yesterday. He was so different, and so attentive; it was really pleasant. He had opened up and told her all about himself; and she was sure he had never done that before with anyone. No games, no false bravado, just a clueless guy trying to find his way. *How refreshing!* She thought. She quickly showered and for once she took some care in dressing. She actually put on some make-up. *This is stupid,* she thought to herself, *I've got at least 10 years on him if not more.* She finished dressing, drank some tea and left for the Library.

Vail was up and dressed at the crack of dawn. He ended up sitting in the Gazebo waiting for James and Elizabeth to rise. When they finally came downstairs he moved to the front porch. Elizabeth almost burst out laughing when they went outside. She could see that Vail was so excited he could hardly contain himself.

“Come on you two, let’s get going,” he called as he rose out of the swing.

James squeezed her hand knowing what she was thinking. *He certainly is excited, Elizabeth; nothing like the old Vail I know. You just may be right my love; he may have finally met his match.*

As they walked along towards the town Vail was practically racing. Elizabeth was having trouble keeping up; *James if he doesn’t slow down I will have to say something. He’s in such a hurry to get there he doesn’t realize how fast he’s going. It’s really kind of cute!*

“Say Vail, slow down a bit, Elizabeth can’t keep up with your strides,” James yelled out to his friend. “We’ll get there soon enough old boy.”

“Sorry chaps, I was thinking about something and didn’t realize. Lovely day, isn’t it?”

They walked along quietly enjoying the morning sounds. Birds were chirping loudly, and several butterflies came whizzing by.

“Have you noticed that the birds seem to have come back?” Vail was making conversation, trying to still his racing heart. “I’ve seen Blue Jays, Mocking birds, and I even heard a woodpecker earlier this morning.”

Elizabeth perked up, “yes, I saw several nests in the trees about the house, I believe they know the burning is over. I also noticed that some of the carrots in the garden had been pulled up and gnawed on, maybe there are rabbits and voles about. Life is slowly returning once again.”

They rounded a corner and headed towards the Library in the distance. As they entered the Library, Vail steered them towards the large staircase. “It’s up here on the second floor.” He told them as he took the steps two at a time. “There are quite a lot of maps James, and lots of pictures of the area. I think you will find what you need up here.”

When they reached the top of the stairs Amanda stepped out of the shadows. Highlighted by the sun once again, Vail’s heart skipped a beat.

“Good morning everyone,” she said softly and smiled, “I’m Amanda.”

Vail stood there staring at her with a silly smile on his face.

Elizabeth squeezed James hand and nodded in Vail's direction. He recovered quickly and introduced James and Elizabeth as the friends he had told her about. She smiled at them in acknowledgement and Elizabeth was taken by her smile.

"I have everything over here on a table," she told them moving towards the center of the room, "if you'll follow me." On a long table on the other side of two rows of books she had laid out several maps, and many books with pictures of the area.

"At one time, before the burning, I was an archeologist and I worked at Machu Picchu for several years; I know the area quite well."

"These are excellent maps of the area, Amanda." James complimented her, "Vail says you know of the community on the plateau."

"Oh yes James, the people are delightful, and very knowledgeable about many things. I enjoyed many an evening in their company; they could help you quite a lot. Are you aware that they are all former spies for their respective governments? CIA, MI5, I am sure you understand."

James nodded in agreement, "They all served their respective governments well, and retirement in a safe environment was a right they all earned."

"Yes, yes," agreed Amanda. "They are all quite elderly but they possess all their faculties, and I'm sure they will be able to help you in your endeavor. Also, another plus for you, they all have short-wave radios; they have kept in contact with their old friends over the years. I found them all quite charming. As a side note James, there are some rather large caves up above their community on a very large plateau."

James spent the morning hours questioning Amanda about different areas; the lay of the land; the native population; areas to be wary of, places that would prove to be too inhospitable, etc. When they were finished he thanked her for all her help. Elizabeth invited her to the house for lunch; she thanked them but said no, she was fine.

Elizabeth then extended her an invitation to dinner at the house explaining that it was their turn to cook this evening. She thanked them, but declined that also. Elizabeth then excused herself and James saying they had to go the warehouse to gather food for the evening.

Vail stayed and offered to help her put all the books and maps away. They began talking about nothing in particular just making conversation, secretly wanting to be in each other's company longer. Forty-five minutes later they left the Library and began walking again. This time they went further up a hill and found an open grassy area. The sun shining thru the trees made the area very inviting; they sat and talked more. She became very animated as she described her work on a dig in Africa some years ago. She was convinced that thousands of years ago there was a large civilization that spread throughout the entire continent. She was finding more and more evidence of that fact when the Arab war broke out and she had to leave. That was when she was sent to Machu Picchu to take over a dig site there.

And then without warning Jake appeared overhead, Vail remembered that he was ferrying Master Jeffery to the house today so he could question the riders. It all happened so fast; still smiling as she spoke, she looked up, and the sight of Jake shook her to her core. Her whole demeanor changed in an instant.

Eyes wide in terror, she was sucked back into that cave with her dying dragon. She began to shake all over, “..no... no!” she whimpered. Suddenly she was on her knees, crawling, trying to find a way out. Vail went to her and tried to comfort her. But she was lost to him; she was lost to everything but her dragon.

“Oh God, no! Please...please?” She was flailing about wildly calling for her dragon and shaking her head, “oh no, no... No!”

Jake knew this would happen but he was counting on Vail to steady her and bring her back.

Vail grabbed her and forcefully shook her; she tried to push him away but he pulled her to him and held her. She flailed about but he wouldn't let her go. He held her to him and spoke to her in a calming, gentle tone, rocking her back and forth. She fought him for some few minutes and after a bit she quieted. Vail continued to hold and rock her, and speak to her. She began to cry softly, and then it all came out as she began to sob and her body began to shake. He could well imagine what it was like for her to lose her dragon.

“I ... I ... never even knew her name!” Great sobs wracked her body. “She died ... saving me ... and I never knew her name... oh Vail,” she whimpered like a small child.

“Shhh ... it's over, it's over.”

As he held her to him, Vail realized that he didn't know how to help her out of this nightmare. He had no idea what to do for her to take away this terrible pain. In his anguish tears began to cascade down his face. For once he was thinking about someone other than himself, and it was killing him that he couldn't help her.

*Oh God... please someone; Jake can you hear me?*

*Just hold her and continue what you are doing Vail. It is helping, believe me. It was Jake, in his mind, telling him what to do. This is a major breakthrough for her; stay with her.*

*But Jake, how will I know...*

*Just be there with her, Jake's voice boomed, that is all that is needed right now.*

Vail sat there with her in his arms for what seemed like hours. He rocked her and spoke to her in a low even voice. He talked about his days at school, about his years on his own, about how he first saw and heard of the dragons and the burning. How he met Peter and his hope for the future. He ruffled her hair several times and kissed her head, and forehead, speaking evenly all the time. He watched the afternoon clouds drifting overhead; he saw birds flying back and forth with twigs in their mouths as they built a nest somewhere close by and commented about it. He saw something small scamper into the brush. He watched for long minutes as a tiny silvery green hummingbird danced before him. He gradually became aware that the sun was starting its dive behind the horizon. He felt her relax and lean against him.

After a bit she softly said, “I'm all right Vail, you can let go now.”

“Are you sure Amanda? I don't mind holding you, really.” His voice was soft, soothing, “I rather like the feel of you in my arms, besides you shouldn't be alone right now, anyway.”

Amanda saw the dried streaks on Vail's face, “Oh Vail,” she gently stroked the side of his face. As she looked into his eyes he was lost to everything but her.

**“I couldn’t help you, and you were in such pain; it was killing me.” Vail hung his head, “Sorry I was such a bloody pansy about it.” He was being brutally honest about his behavior.**

**“Oh but Vail, that’s what finally reached me, your voice. You pulled me back from that black pit.”**

**Vail stood and extended his hand to Amanda. As she stood she leaned forward and kissed him on his cheek. Without thinking Vail pulled her to him and kissed her full on the mouth. He took her head in his hands and smelled her hair; turning her head he kissed her neck and then caught himself before he went further. She was not shocked, and responded quite passionately to his touch. It took him by surprise, however pleasant. Their embrace lasted longer than he thought it would. He was smiling broadly when they parted.**

**“Dear lady, we had better stop. I don’t think I could contain myself if this should continue. I should get you home, the sun is going down and it’s starting to get rather chilly.” He slipped his arm around her and they slowly walked back the way they had come. She led him down several streets and turned onto a quiet little cul-de-sac. There was a little house in the center, all white with black trim and a long front porch. He knew it was hers.**

**As they climbed the stairs she turned and smiled at him. “Vail, will you stay with me? I’d rather not be alone.” She looked at him in such a way that he knew he could not refuse her.**

**“Of course I’ll stay with you; I told you I wasn’t going to leave you, Amanda.” Then more forcefully he added, “I’ll sleep on the front porch if needs be, but I’m not leaving you alone tonight.”**

**“Oh dear, I meant ...I ...well that is ...oh damn it! I would like you to stay with me tonight. I can’t believe I’m throwing myself at you like this,” she was blushing now like a young girl.**

**Vail took her hands in his and smiling he brought them to his lips and kissed them, “dear lady, wild horses couldn’t drag me away.”**

**She smiled at him and opened the door, and they went inside. He found it was a nice little place, very quaint and comfortable. There was a big overstuffed couch, and 2 large chairs with ottomans. There was a large picture window framed with drapes, all done in a pale light blue giving the place a warm cozy feel. She asked if he was hungry, and much to his surprise, he found that he was starving. She smiled and said she was too and went into the kitchen. She began to make all sorts of noises as she flittered about preparing a meal. He looked about the sitting room; he noticed all the books on archeology, and there were many on metaphysics, and the Bible. She had obviously been reading and trying to understand what had been happening to the world.**

**He called to Jake and asked him to relay to James where he was and that everything was all right. Jake commended him on his gentleness and restraint. He told Jake she was a lot stronger than he thought. Jake told him to just keep on doing what he was doing; whatever it was, it was working quite well. Vail wondered what the hell it was he was doing ‘so well’.**

**He found himself enticed into the kitchen by the most marvelous smells. He offered her his somewhat limited help. She laughed at him and then had him make a pot of tea when he insisted. She told him he could fix himself a drink if he so desired, he declined and instead sat on a bar stool and watched her. She fixed a quick sauce, and had water boiling for the pasta in no time. It smelled wonderful, and he offered to set the table.**



She opened the oven and took out some slices of garlic bread and placed them in a breadbasket. She opened up a bottle of Merlot, and spying the wine glasses on the shelf above, Vail got them down for her. She placed a steaming platter of spaghetti on the table and they sat down. They ate and drank and talked about a variety of subjects for several hours. When she rose to clear the table he helped, and even ended up drying the dishes. He rather enjoyed the task; it gave him an excuse to be near her longer.

They went into the sitting room and spent some time discussing the different archeological digs she had been on. She was very passionate about her work, and Vail enjoyed listening to her description of the various 'finds' she had come across during her brief career. She described the area around Machu Picchu. She told him of a large plateau above the community of retiree's. She began to describe the elderly residents of the town, and Vail laughed himself silly as she portrayed each one. He could only imagine trying to keep a straight face when he met them in real life. He hoped he could convince her to come with him. He had already decided that if she wouldn't come, he would remain here with her. She got up and went about the house turning off the lamps. Vail stood up and she took his hand, smiling shyly she headed up the stairs.

Vail was beside himself with conflict. Part of him wanted to be with her desperately, but the other part was telling him to control himself. When they entered her bedroom she turned around and leaning close to him she said softly, "... If you would rather go, I'll understand."

Looking down at her, staring into those green eyes Vail knew that he wasn't going anywhere. He reached for her and took her in his arms and kissed her passionately, exploring her mouth. She kissed him back and left no doubt that she wanted more, moaning at his touch. Vail lost all control and dived in wholeheartedly. Lifting her he placed her on the bed and began to caress her as he removed her clothing. He was surprised at how lean and fit her body was, and how supple it felt to his touch. He found himself wanting to please her, to make her happy. He loved her with his heart, something new to him, and was amazed when she moaned and even yelled his name several times during the night. And she was not without her talents as she had him call her name loudly once, surprising himself. They bonded in love that night, and would only discover it later.

Vail heard a deep throaty roar of 'Approval' from outside. He knew it was from Jake.

Totally spent, they laid in each others arms completely contented. He kept kissing her forehead saying how lucky he was; how fate had brought them together. She was worried about her being so much older than him. He told her that was silly, that that sort of thing didn't mean anything anymore. He liked her just the way she was and he didn't care what anyone thought anyway.

"My dear sweet lady, I want the whole bloody mountain to know about you! I don't intend to ever let you go. It's taken half my life to find you; do you really think I give a rat's ass what anybody thinks? Let's just lie here and enjoy each other's charms; of which you have ample supply I might add." They both chuckled at that statement.

Amanda snuggled close to Vail and rested her head on his chest. She had not expected such intense emotion to well up inside her. He had a lean muscled body and also some other charms that pleased her very much! She couldn't imagine what he saw in her, but she was thankful he was so smitten. He was very good looking in a roguish way and could probably have any female he wanted, but he chose her! *Oh God, is this real?*

As if reading her mind, Vail began to speak. "You know, I'm lying here, thanking the gods for my good fortune. " He squeezed her to him gently.

**“I never thought in a million years I would find a woman like you; intelligent, compassionate, warm, and terribly, terribly sexy. A woman who looks at me the way you do. You won’t tell me to take a hike, will you?”**

**“Oh no, no way. I don’t know where this going Vail, I’m afraid to look any further than right now. I don’t want this to end, so let’s just enjoy it as long as possible, as long as it lasts.” She snuggled up closer to him, and he pulled her closer.**

**“Yes my sweet, let’s just enjoy and not think about anything else.”**

**As they lay there his mind began to wander through all the events in his life that had brought him to this place. He was surprised at how much he had changed over the past seven years. He was thankful for every bit of it, for it had prepared him to recognize the possibilities of a life with someone like this remarkable woman. They were quietly lying there when she began to speak softly of what had happened to her.**

**“I had been in Machu Picchu working on a newly discovered dig when an old friend of mine, a Professor Talbot, called and asked me to come to a dig site. He was very excited and said he believed that he had the find of the century. He needed me there as soon as possible. I told him it was impossible for me to leave right then. Perhaps in week or so I would be able to get away. He kept pressing me, but in the end he finally accepted that I wasn’t going to drop everything and leave.” She cleared her throat and continued. “He gave me directions to where he would be and said he would see me in a week. I ended up leaving 10 days later and when I got to the States I had to charter a plane. We left Atlanta and were heading west when about two hours into the flight we were attacked by something. The pilot was yelling and screaming, there was a terrible screeching sound coming from outside. There was no let up in the banging and buffeting of the plane. And then suddenly there was fire all around us; the pilot was screaming to get on my seat belt that we were going down. I must have been thrown free of the aircraft when it crashed. When I came to I was under a piece of the fuselage. I could hear some kind of noise so I raised my head to see what it was; I was unprepared for scene before me. There were creatures, dragons, tearing the plane apart. I must have passed out because when I woke up again they were gone.”**

**“Amanda,” Vail began, holding her close to him, “you don’t have to do this.”**

**“No, I want to do this, please Vail, I need to do this.” She told him imploringly.**

**“Ok my sweet, but I want you to remember that I’m right here. We will get thru this together, ok?” He kissed her on the forehead and gave her a reassuring hug.**

**“I had no idea where I was. I stayed by the wreck for several days thinking that help would come. It never did. I started to head west hoping I would find a town or something. That’s when I figured out that something terrible had happened across the country. Towns were burned or burning; burned bodies were everywhere. The small groups of people that I ran into were scared silly. I began to have these weird dreams, dreams that urged me to go west. I slowly made my way from town to town. I would stay for a time at each place helping where I could. Then I would move on to the next place; always heading west. It was a crazy time, so uncertain, so scary. I seemed to wander about looking for something, something I couldn’t put my finger on.”**

**“Months passed, and the dreams kept getting stranger and stranger. It was a tough time for me; there were roving bands of marauders all over the country. I was deathly afraid of getting caught by one of them. I had heard stories, and they chilled my blood cold. I steered clear of them; I became really good at moving about and not leaving a trail. And then one day I found a sign in the road, Provo, 80 miles. Utah, now I knew where I was; a lot of good it did me. I hid out in caves and culverts. The dragons seemed to show up around sundown, so I would find shelter before the sun went down.**

**One time I heard a terrible screeching and hissing outside my cave. I carefully went to the entrance and took a look. Up in sky there were three horrible dragons fighting with a much larger dragon. This dragon was different from the three fighting with it. It was bigger, much bigger, and its coloring was different too. It was definitely stronger and healthier. It destroyed the 3 dragons quickly and flamed them to ash. Then it flew off to the west. I didn’t know it at the time, but that dragon was Jake.”**

**“Several months later, the weather turned really bad, rain and lightening storms. I barely made five miles a day. I was constantly looking for shelter. It was getting very cold and I guessed that winter was coming. I had to find a town or a settlement for the winter. Several days later I ran across a small settlement. About fifty people were trying to make their way to a place that they said they all dreamt about. They welcomed me in, they were very nice; I stayed with them for 4 months. There wasn’t much to do so we had long conversations about the dreams they were having, and how they had been led by the dreams for over a year. That’s when I really started to pay attention to my own dreams. When they started out again I went with them for several weeks, but then I went off on my own. I didn’t know why, I just knew that I had to go a different way.”**

**“And then one morning I was in a small cave getting my things together when I heard them. They were right on top of me. Apparently there was a large cave on the other side of the mountain I had camped in. I was scared to death. I moved all the way back into the cave. I pressed myself against the back wall and held my breath. About an hour later they left as quickly as they had come. I stood up and started to move forward and lost my balance and slammed into the wall. It gave way and I went tumbling down into the larger cave. I landed with a loud thud. I thought I was dead. After a few minutes I lifted my head and looked around. Vail, I was so scared; I could hardly breathe. That’s when I heard her for the first time.”**

*Hello? Is somebody there?*

*Oh my God, there’s a child in here!* I thought to myself. **“Where are you, don’t worry I’ll help you.”** I whispered.

*I can’t see where I am. Oh please hurry, they will be back and I do not want to be like them.*

**“She was sobbing hysterically out of fear; I couldn’t see her anywhere. One of my dreams broke and it all made sense. I quieted her down and through a hit and miss type of effort I finally found her. A tiny little shiny green egg, lying there waiting for me. I picked her up and a jolt of electricity hit me and knocked me down. We bonded and suddenly I wasn’t alone any more.”**

**“She was so excited, and so happy. I was mesmerized by the sound of her voice in my head. I finally came to my senses and realized that we had to get out of there quickly. She told me where to go and how to get out before those monsters came back. I found a perfect cave for us several weeks later, and set up camp there. She grew at an astonishing rate. We would talk for hours about all sorts of things; she was so knowledgeable. She told me about the knowledge all dragons receive when they make contact with their rider. How the dragons were part of some big plan to save the world. The bigger she got, the more she knew. And I began to notice that her voice was sounding more mature.”**

Amanda swallowed hard and sat up, "Vail, was there any wine left? I could use a drink right now."

Vail got up and slipped on his pants, "I'll get you a glass love, stay right there." He was back in five minutes with two glasses. He handed her one and leaned over and kissed her cheek. He sat down on the side of the bed and took a sip of the wine. "Are you sure you want to continue with this?"

"Yes Vail, I need to do it, I've run from it for too long. I need to tell someone everything that happened. I've got to release it all," she leaned over and patted his knee, "it's all right my darling, honest." She took a deep breath and began again.

"I had gone out early that morning looking for some food; it was getting more and more difficult finding anything to eat. I had come across some tracks and was following them when she called to me. She said she was ready to hatch, that I should return quickly.

I was so excited that I didn't pay any attention to the sky, or to my surroundings. I rushed back to the cave and ran inside. There were pieces of the eggshell lying all around. And then I saw her. Oh Vail she was so beautiful!" Amanda pressed her hand to Vail's chest, "she was a creamy dark green, like a forest green color. She had to have been at least 22 feet tall. Her eyes Vail, I could see the intelligence in them. She was so magnificent, so majestic looking. She ... she ... started to step forward."

She began to tell me... *There you are my friend, how beautiful you are ...*

Amanda took a long deep breath and continued, shaking; "They burst into the cave screeching and hissing, my God it was so loud! She turned and faced them roaring. My ears were roaring; it was so loud I couldn't think straight. She positioned herself between them and me. She swung her tail and knocked me down and pushed me against the wall where the eggshells were laying. With once swift movement she covered me up and turned and went for her attackers." Amanda took a long drink of wine, her breathing was very rapid now, and Vail was very concerned for her.

"The noise, Vail, it was so loud! I couldn't see anything at first; I thought for sure I was going to die. Oh God! Vail, they ripped her to pieces! It was so fast, so quick, and then they were gone. I was alone and I knew she was gone." Tears were streaming down Amanda's face now, "Vail, I didn't even know her name..." Great sobs shook her body as she buried her face against Vail's chest.

Vail held her close; "Oh Mandy, I am so sorry, so very sorry for you. I cannot imagine life without Essex. You were right; you needed to get this all out. The pain will never go away my sweet, but it will become bearable. We will face it together." She buried herself in his arms and cried tears of relief now.

As he held her and rocked back and forth he went over in his mind what she told him. Something was gnawing at him; he was missing something, something she said. He kept replaying it in his mind. *She said her dragon had... wait a minute! She said ... she! Something didn't make sense. Here in the States the men ride females and the women ride the males! Her dragon was a female, like us! Suddenly the full implication struck Vail. By Jove! She was destined to be a rider with us! Of course! I've got to talk to Valotin and Alakar about this.*

As he sat there thinking, she quieted and he realized that she had fallen asleep. He laid her down and gently covered her up. He went downstairs to the sitting room thinking. He wanted to call to Valotin, but he realized that it too late in the night.

*It is not necessary for you to bother Valotin or Alakar with this. You have paved the way for her to accept another dragon; and you have showed her that love is possible again. You have done well Vail, exceptionally well. High praise, coming from Jake.*

*Thank you Jake, But I really didn't do all that much. I find that I care deeply for Amanda. I don't know how long this will last, and I don't know if she feels the same. But for the first time in my life I'm willing to take a chance, a chance that this could turn into a lifetime thing. There, he had finally admitted it; finally laid it all out in the open.*

*Your spirit shines brightly; Jake told him, I can see it even from here. You have found love Vail; now you must show her that she has also. Just being there for her is all that is required.*

Vail returned upstairs and slipped into bed without disturbing Amanda. He folded himself around her and fell into a deep sleep. He dreamt of them flying together, and in the dream she was riding on a large dark green dragon, the Lady Elise.

In the lush mountainside of Peru the little community of Quartos was rousing itself to face another day. Many of the elderly residents woke with memories of their dreams; dreams which they had been having for the past several months - dreams that suddenly intensified during the past week. Being such a close-knit community, they had discussed these dreams many times among themselves. Long ago they gave up all the silly rituals that barred them from communication with each other. They discussed the details of these dreams; the clear images of what they saw led each to realize that their dreams were the same. In the end they decided that someone, person or God, was trying to tell them something; these dreams were preparing them for something.

They decided to test their theory. It was Elliott, a retired MI5 agent, who made the suggestion. "If these are what we think they are, lets ask a question," heads nodded in agreement, "Ah, but what should we ask?"

"It would be wise to ask what we are all guessing at. How about 'are we being prepared for some future event?'" Nigel, a fellow retired MI5 agent, asked him. "I mean come on El, dragons and riders? Really old boy, can you see yourself riding a huge behemoth?"

"You won't believe this Nigel ole boy, but yes, I can! I don't know how, but yes, I can see it!" Elliott looked at his longtime friend and shook his head, "I just can't explain it yet."

"Finally someone says it!" Dee shouted, "It's about damn time you all say what you're thinking. We are all feeling the same thing. You know me Elliott, I am about as level headed as they come; I don't go in for mumbo-jumbo stuff." They all knew that Dee had been one the 'ghost assassins', highly regarded for her coolness under fire. "But you have to agree that times have changed. And I'll tell you all something else; the dreams are coming from a dragon! A dragon named Jake!"

"Ah here we go again... now you can predict who's sending the dreams. Come on Dee, this is crazy, there has to be another explanation, a more rational one," Nigel said, mocking her.

"I believe the wise Miss Dee is correct," interrupted Lee Chin. It was unusual for him to join in when these conversations became heated. But this time he did for he knew that she was correct; he had the same knowledge. "There are strange forces at work in the world now; we have all seen and heard on our short wave radios about the destruction caused by the fire dragons. Why should we deny that these dream signs maybe signals of a new order that will come. Besides, the dragon named Jake is indeed sending us these dreams. I have known his name since the first week the dreams began. I have waited to see if one of you would also recognize this and see his name."

"That settles it from now on we keep records of everyone's dreams. We'll soon find out where this is leading," Elliott announced. "And we ask the question starting tonight."

The next morning found them all in a state of shock. Each one said the dragon in their dreams look them straight in the eye, addressed them by name, and said, "Yes, yes you are!"

James woke up rested and refreshed. He was in a great mood and reached for Elizabeth to share it. She was more than accommodating as it gave her a chance to be with him longer. Lying in each other's arms, they heard Terry and Sean tiptoeing down the stairway. They were about as quiet as a grizzly in a honey shop.

**"I told you he didn't come in last night. I swear that man is like a magnet. If there's a woman within 10 miles of him – zap! – they find him! Where in the hell could he find someone all the way out here in the middle of BFE? Did you notice how funny he behaved the night before last? And yesterday Sean, he was actually nice to me! Swear to God, he actually smiled at me! Something is up Sean; I just know it I tell you!"**

**"Shhh – give it a rest! It's his life you know. You're like an old woman sometimes Terry; a gossiping old woman! Now leave it alone, and hush up before you wake the house."**

James and Elizabeth laughed quietly at their bickering.

**"Hold it down you two clods!" Reggie's booming voice could be heard.**

**"Did you have to yell so loud?" Cynthia sleepily complained.**

**"Hey, what's going on out there?" Theo's deep voice thundered.**

**"Ahhh ... I wanted to sleep late this morning..." a sleepy retort from Susanna.**

**"I guess we'd better get up, seems everyone is awake now." James moaned.**

**"Hey, this is our vacation too!" Elizabeth protested and grabbing James by the arm she pulled him to her, "you just come back here right now mister," she cooed, and James knew by the look on her face that he was going nowhere. He really didn't mind; he enjoyed spending this time with her. James dived under the covers and soon had Elizabeth squealing with delight. Afterwards as they lay in each other's arms Elizabeth voiced her concern about Vail.**

*You heard what Terry said, James. Do you think they got together last night? Is Vail like that, I mean, does he work that fast?* Elizabeth thought outwardly.

*My sweet, Vail is Vail. But I have to admit that I've never seen him quite like this, so nice, so cheery to everyone. He looked at Elizabeth and smiled, Ooh ...he's got it bad all right.*

*Well, you know Jake works pretty fast when he sets his mind to it. She grinned, we'll see later I imagine.*

Down in the kitchen Terry was busy making a pot of tea. He poured himself a glass of juice and stood on the back porch looking out at the garden. A sudden movement caught his eye and he saw a rabbit scurry off in a flash.

*Aha! So there are rabbits out there. Good, that means that some survived. Come on world, you can start right here to come back from the brink.*

He heard the teakettle start its scream and went back into the kitchen. He fixed a pot of tea and turned the oven on to warm up.

**"I'm going to make some biscuits Sean, want some," he asked his life partner.**

**"Yeah, sounds good. Say, do you want to explore the town today? Might be fun ole' boy, we could go into all those houses..." he knew that Terry loved exploring.**

**“Oh yes, that sounds like fun. And we need to think of getting some winter clothes, and some climbing gear. Just trust me on this, we need it.” Both had been avid climbers; and Sean knew better than to argue. On many an occasion silly items that Terry had insisted on them getting had meant the difference between life and death. He learned never to argue when he insisted on something.**

**“Have you wondered what our dragons will be like when they return? I hope Delan hasn’t changed too much; I liked him the way he was.” Sean sipped his tea.**

**“Oh I wouldn’t worry too much about it. We’re being prepared for something great, that’s quite obvious.” Terry looked at Sean, “Our dragons will love us no matter what.”**

**Across town Vail woke up early in a fantastic mood. He hadn’t felt this good in a long, long time. Amanda was curled up with her back pressed against him. He quietly got up and went into the bathroom and washed. He realized that he was quite thirsty, so he went down to the kitchen to get a drink. He looked in the refrigerator and found large bottle of tomato juice.**

***Ah! Tomato juice, great! The woman has good taste.***

**He looked about and found the liquor cabinet and made himself a Bloody Mary. Taking a sip he uttered a low *mmm...that’s good!***

**Then he poured one for Amanda and brought both glasses upstairs with him.**

**As he entered the bedroom he stopped and stared at her, remembering the night before. A smile slowly played its way across his face. She was lying on her side facing away from him. The sun shinning thru the window bathed her in its rays; her hair was aglow again with a halo.**

***God what a woman!* He stared lovingly at her for a bit, *Funny, I don’t remember her hair being so long.* He stood there for a moment till realization suddenly dawned on him. He placed the juice on the nightstand and slipped back under the covers. He scooted over to her and began to caress the back of her neck, waking her gently.**

**“Mmm .... Oh my ...” she rolled over and stretched seductively.**

**Smiling she opened her eyes and saw Vail sitting there, starring at her with a silly smile on his face.**

**“Good morning love,” she rose up on her elbows, “Vail, why are you looking at me like that, what’s wrong?”**

**He reached over and lifted the covers, smiled, and leaned over and kissed her on her nose.**

**“Oh those dragons! Come with me my pet; no, no; do not ask, just come!”**

**He led her to the bathroom where there was a huge mirror covering the wall above the counter and sink area. He flipped on the light, “Look for yourself my beauty!” he said with a flourish and a wave of his hand.**

**Amanda looked in the mirror and was dumbfounded. She didn’t recognize the woman looking back at her. She raised her hands to her face, it was young and supple again. All those little ‘character lines’ (as her mother called them) were gone. Her hair was full, thick, and shoulder length. She looked at her body – “Oh my!” She ran her hands over herself outlining her body. Her breasts were firmer and lifted higher, as in her youth. She turned around; her rear was rounder, firmer, and had also lifted, her tummy was flat, her thighs were firm. She looked as she had when she was in her early thirties. She turned to Vail and the smile on his face told her that he was most pleased at the change.**

**“My God ... but how?”**



It was enhancement, plain and simple, Vail knew. *This means that she's a rider, I'm sure of it!*  
"It had to have been Jake, and possibly Valotin and Alakar." He told her.  
*My God she's stunning*, he thought to himself, better than he could have ever imagined.

Amanda threw her arms around his neck and drew him close.  
"Oh Vail you don't have to be ashamed of me after all."

Vail pulled back and held her at arms length, "Ashamed! Woman I was never ashamed of you; you were the one with the age problem. Look at me Amanda, I liked you just the way you were, I mean it, damn it! This is just an added bonus from the dragons. Now stop talking so silly and come here my pet." He pulled her close and kissed her.

They spent the next hour loving each other. Vail found more pleasure than he thought possible. He wanted to please her, not himself; and he did just that! Spent, they laid in each other's arms enjoying the warm glow of the moment. His affection for her took on a deeper tone and he soon realized that he had fallen in love with her

"I want you to come with me to the house Amanda. Don't argue with me, I want you with me for life. That is if you'll have me." Amanda was smiling at him now. "I know that I have been a selfish bore in the past, but that is over. Finding you at last has given me something I didn't even know I needed; and I like the feeling."

"I'll come with you Vail; I never thought ... never... that I would be able to find someone; especially someone like you. If you're by my side I won't ever be afraid again."

"Bloody all right!" He squeezed her tightly. "Now let's get up and go face our future together."

They rose and showered, dressed and ate quickly. She gathered up her books, and they left. Vail unabashedly held her hand all the way to the house on the hill. As they walked up the pathway to the house Terry came out the front door. His eyes grew wide as he saw them approaching.

"My, my but you've been busy old man!" He came down the steps and right up to Amanda and quickly looked her over. Approving, he took her hand and kissed it, all the while introducing himself with a bow. "No wonder he has been hiding you my dear, you are a beauty."

Amanda laughed, and eyes twinkling said, "It is I, kind sir, I assure you, who has been keeping him all to myself. I wanted to be sure he was real."

"Oh my God girl, you've got it bad. Vail," Terry admonished him laughingly, "you'd better be good to this angel; she is a rare find."

"Don't you fret Terry; she's going to be around for a long time. Time enough to get to know you better!" Vail slipped his arm around Amanda and gave her a little squeeze, "don't pay attention to him love; he enjoys prying into other peoples lives, like an old hen."

Sean came out onto the porch and surveyed the situation quickly. "Well, well, I see cupid finally got you with one of his arrows; or was it a sledge hammer? 'Bout time, I'd say!" He came down the steps and went right up to Amanda. "How do you do pretty lady, my name is Sean."

He extended his hand, and when Amanda raised her hand he took it and pulled her to him and gave her a big bear hug and swung her around. Surprised, she laughed heartily.

“Ah good, she has a sense of humor; you’ll need it with this group. Well, Terry and I are off to explore the town, see you two later. Come on Terry, the morning is going fast.” They were off laughing and talking as they went down the pathway.

“They are a delightful couple Vail, really.” Amanda was quick to pick up on their status.

“Yes, they are; but don’t think that they’re pansies. They are two of the deadliest fighters I have ever seen. Even your Sarah is awed by them.” They started to climb the stairs to the front porch. “When the black devils see them coming, they give them a wide berth. Now let’s see who else is up.”

He opened the front door and they went inside and headed for the kitchen. The house was quiet and Vail thought no one else was awake. As they entered the kitchen they saw Elizabeth was making breakfast for her and James. James was sitting at the table drinking a cup of tea.

Elizabeth turned around just as they came in and smiled. Then she stared at Amanda wide-eyed, “Oh my goodness, how... when did that happen?”

James turned and stood up, “...my word! Amanda, you look fantastic!” He looked at Vail with a questioning glance.

“I don’t know for sure, but I suspect Jake and Valotin,” Vail answered him shrugging his shoulders.

Elizabeth could see that Vail had changed too; he seemed softer than before, not quite as rigid and he had that look. She knew that they had cemented their relationship in more ways than one and she was happy for him.

Rather shyly Amanda greeted them, “Good morning you two. Quite a change isn’t it?” she said twirling around. “I’m just as amazed as you.” Just then the rest of the riders bounded into the kitchen.

“Hey everyone, what’s up?” Reggie looked at them and then at Amanda. “Well, well what have we here? Vail, you lusty old dog, so this is where you have been going.”

“Reggie!” Cynthia admonished him, to no avail.

“Welcome lovely lady,” Reggie introduced himself and Cynthia. Theo and Susanna greeted her warmly and they were all soon sitting about the table and Amanda was regaling them with stories of Peru and the small community there. She had a way with a tale and they were all mesmerized, Vail couldn’t help but feel a sense of pride for her.

*Riders, it was Jake calling to them all, your dragons will return at the end of the week You are all rested, and your spirits are shinning brightly again. Enjoy the rest of the week. Amanda, I am pleased to see you so happy again.*

*Thank you Jake, for everything! She replied quickly.*

**They spent the rest of the week enjoying each other's company and making one more run to the warehouse. Terry and Sean returned to the house and Terry announced that he was going to prepare a feast for everyone that evening.**

**Each rider's thoughts were on the return of their dragons. What would they be like? Had they changed in anyway? They entertained themselves with music and dancing and stories of the past. True to his word, Terry had prepared a sumptuous feast. They ate and drank and bonded closely.**

**Though still worried about Amanda and her reaction to the dragons, Vail felt certain that she would be okay. He was certain that she would have a dragon someday so he left that thought alone.**

**Amanda was worried too, but something told her that she would be all right as long as she had Vail by her side. Vail took Amanda to his room that night and they fell asleep in each other's arms talking of their future together. The week ended on a high note, all ready for the coming day. They awoke rested and refreshed, ready for the future. Anticipation was thick in the air.**

**They ate in silence and soon got about the business of packing and closing up the house. Amanda went to her little house with Vail and packed her bag. She told Vail that she was going to miss the little place, but she was happy that she would be with him.**

As the sun reached its zenith, the noon sky was suddenly full of very large dragons all calling to their riders in joyful voices. The front lawn of the estate was soon awash in loud roars as 11 dragons landed. The riders came running out of the house and met a sight few have ever seen. Their dragons were bigger, brighter, and utterly fantastic to behold. Each rider ran to his or her dragon with faces aglow and loud shouts of warm greetings.

Vail dragged Amanda with him, "You must, my love. Believe me, it will be okay." He rushed to Essex and threw his arms about the large beast's head.

*Essex! Oh God how I have missed you. So much has happened; I have so much to tell you!*

*I can see my friend. Your spirit shines so brightly, I am very happy for you. Please introduce your Lady and ask if I may speak with her.* Essex turned his large head to face Amanda.

Vail let his friend go and turned to Amanda, "he asks permission to speak to you, Amanda. Are you up to it? Please my love."

Amanda nodded assent. Her mind heard the strong voice of Essex as he greeted her.

*I bid greetings to the Lady who has filled my companion with such joy. You are a remarkable woman Lady Amanda, and will be a great rider yourself one day soon.*

*Oh! Amanda was taken by surprise. I had never thought that... you fill me with hope, Essex.*

*Of course I do, for I am Essex!* He roared loudly.

"Vail? Is it possible?" Amanda had never thought that she could experience that kind of joy again.

"Amanda, if Essex says it's possible, then it is!" Vail was grinning at her happily.

James now spoke to them all, "Riders, gather your things, we return to Dragons Hill!"

Each rider gathered their duffle bags of goodies and loaded them onto their dragons. Vail loaded his and Amanda's things and then instructed her how to climb onto Essex's back. The great dragon lowered his wing to allow her easy access and she climbed on and sat just behind Vail. She held onto him as he instructed her and they were soon airborne. She found the ride to Dragons Hill quite thrilling.

Twenty minutes later they were all deposited on the plateau. They were all told to store away their things and return to the plateau. They did so quickly and as they stepped back out onto the plateau Elizabeth came forward and explained to Amanda that she was to remain with her and James. She understood and waved to Vail as he mounted Essex. The large group of dragons took off again were gone in minutes.

"It may take several hours Amanda; there will be a lot of physical changes when they return. Enhancement will take place during the exchange of information. Oh, not to worry. It means that they will become more of what they already are."

**“I won’t lose Vail, will I?” Amanda feared that the feelings he had for would change.**

**“Not at all,” James told her. “As a matter of fact his feelings will be deeper, a new respect for all life, and for the love you two share. You’ll see, have no fear.”**

**Elizabeth and Kate kept her busy with all sorts of meaningless chores. She was thankful, for it helped to pass the time. Three hours passed and they still had not returned. Amanda was anxious and climbed back up to the plateau to wait. It was then that she saw four of the strange Blue dragons making their way to the landing area. Jake flew over and landed just as the Blue dragons arrived. From her vantage point Amanda could see that they were greeting each other and there was a long discussion of some sort. Jake turned and stared right at her several times during their conversation. She wondered what was going on. As she turned to leave she ran smack into Kate, almost knocking her over; Daniel was with her. She informed them of what she had seen and that she had no idea what it was about.**

**Daniel went to Jake and the Blues and conversed with them for some minutes, pausing to look her way he seemed to be deciding something. Then Daniel went below and returned minutes later with a leather jacket in his hands. Jake called them both over and had a conversation with Kate that she wasn’t privy to. Amanda had a feeling that she would soon find out what was going on.**

**Jake asked her to come over and lowered his head to right in front of her. *Amanda, I have a favor to ask of you, I need your help in something. I would not ask, but this a dire situation, and you may be able to help.***

***Of course Jake, what can I do for you? Has something happened to Vail, is he all right? She was alarmed briefly.***

***Vail is just fine; he and the others are almost finished. They will be returning very soon. But something has occurred, and I feel that you may be the only one able to help us. The Blue Dragons have found a female dragon on the desert floor not far from here. It is badly injured and will not live if we cannot reach it.***

**At an unspoken signal from Jake, Kate and Daniel, and James and Elizabeth suddenly flanked an unaware Amanda on both sides. Jake’s next words chilled her to her core. *It is in the throes of madness Amanda, madness resulting from the loss of its newly acquired rider.***

***No!***

**Amanda swooned; she couldn’t catch her breath.**

***Oh God no...!***

**The whole plateau began to swirl around her; she fought to regain control.**

***Amanda! It was Kate’s voice that she heard, strong and commanding; you know what it is like to be in that place.***

**Amanda shook her head 'no' and backed up as Kate continued.**

***You above all know what she is feeling; you know that dark place that beckons her. You can show her how you overcame your despair. How you gained a new life in its place. You have Vail now, and he loves you dearly. Can you not give that chance to this dragon? Amanda, only you can do this, only you have been where she is now.***

Tears rolled down Amanda's face at the thought of revisiting that horrible place again. She knew the pain the poor thing was feeling. How could she willingly feel that pain again? Her mind was racing now.

*Oh Vail, where are you? I need your strength right now!*

She told herself to face the reality of the situation, to step beyond the paralyzing fear.

And then crystal clarity set in and she realized that Kate was right; she knew it in her heart. If she could bring herself to relate to this poor wretched creature, maybe she could save her. Hesitantly she looked at Jake, then the Blue dragons beyond. Maybe she could do this; she nodded to Jake.

*All right Jake, I will try to help her.*

*Good! You will ride with Kate on me.*

Daniel put the leather jacket on Amanda and Kate took her hand. She gave it a reassuring squeeze and they both mounted Jake and were soon airborne. Amanda's thoughts were racing wildly in all directions.

*Oh God, please give me enough strength not to fall into that pit again.*

Sensing what was going on in her mind Jake spoke to her to calm her.

*Amanda, you are a lot stronger than you think. You have gone thru this and found your way out and it has made you stronger. You must conquer your fear of the darkness and despair. I will be there for you; you may draw on my reserves if you need them.*

About a half hour later she saw two of the Blue dragons circling up ahead, below them she could make out four more on the ground. They were standing around another dragon and it was thrashing about wildly. As they got closer she began to make out the scene better. There were four of the Blue dragons on the ground trying to help the ...

*Oh no! She's forest green... she's just like...oh no...!*

*Amanda! Get hold of yourself! Jake's voice was commanding, booming in her head.*

*You can do this.*

Amanda shook her head and pulled herself together.

*I can do this, I can! I will!*

As they landed, Amanda found herself unprepared for the noise. Loud roars and wailing were coming from the poor wretched dragon as it thrashed about. She was huge, almost the size of Essex. She felt Kate squeeze her hand as she climbed off of Jake and began to walk slowly towards the dragon. Jake asked the Blue dragons to back off.

Amanda felt the pain this poor creature was feeling, it hit her instantly. She stood there staring at the poor thing and her heart went out to her. She had been where this poor creature was now; and she knew the dark place that was beckoning her. Tears began streaming down her face as she hesitantly moved forward. The poor thing was a mess; one wing was shredded in the middle, and there was a nasty open gash on her right hindquarter. She was oblivious to her surroundings; she felt only pain. *How well I know that pain,* Amanda thought to herself.

As Amanda moved closer, she asked Jake to have everyone leave the ground area. They did as she asked and she was now alone on the ground with a wildly thrashing dragon.

*Gently ease yourself into her thoughts Amanda, very gently,* Jake instructed her. He concentrated and tried to develop a link between the two. He noted that the poor creature was in agony.

Kate felt an emptiness about her, a sensation of utter hopelessness filled the ether. She tried to reach out to her.

*Please, calm yourself; let us help you,* Amanda began, inching ever closer, *please, do not go to that dark place. I know the pain you are feeling right now, but it will get better. There is a life for you beyond this. You must not give in to this darkness and despair. Please let us help you.*

Striking her almost like a physical blow she heard, *she is gone! I could not help her, could not save her. THEY took her from me! Nooo!*

Amanda's heart was wrenched; she could feel great sobs coming from the dragon.

*She is gone! Nooo!* The large dragon thrashed about and roared loudly. *Let them flame me now, please? Do you not see? She is gone!* Rearing up, she raised her head and looked at Amanda. Great sobs erupted from her throat and her mind screamed, *GO AWAY!*

*NO!* Amanda screamed violently catching the dragon's attention.

*I will not let you give up like this!* Amanda yelled back at her. *You must let us help you. Please, please don't throw your life away, there is more for you. I know what you are feeling; I know what you are going thru...*

*No... You have no idea, the pain - the hurt...!* She roared loudly, *she is gone! Go away! Go away rider, you have no idea what it feels like!*

Amanda rushed forward and Jake was alarmed that she was too close to the wildly trashing dragon. *Amanda, No!* He shouted to her.

*Yes I do! Yes - I do... I... I lost my dragon just at hatching! They burst in and killed her before she could even tell me her name!* Amanda was sobbing hysterically now; *so you see, I do know what you are feeling! I have been there; I wanted to die too!*

The tortured dragon snapped her head up quickly and looked at Amanda now with eyes that saw her for the first time.

*You know? The pain, how did you stop the pain - the guilt of failing to protect?*

Amanda was now only a few feet away and realized that if the dragon struck out in anguish, she could easily kill her.

Several hundred miles away; having finished the enhancement, the small group of riders was returning to Dragons Hill when they were apprised of what had happened. Vail went white when he learned what Amanda had agreed to do. He and Essex headed for the area at lightening speed. As they approached they were stopped by Jake and filled in on what was taking place below. Jake warned them to let her continue, that she was reaching the poor dragon, and most certainly would be able to help her. All Vail could do was watch from above as his love placed her life on the line.

Suddenly the dragon began thrashing about wildly, roaring in heart-rending pain. Vail watched in horror as Amanda leapt forward and threw herself onto the large dragon's head. Vail almost fell off of Essex as he watched the scene that was taking place below him; *it's my dream, I dreamt all this!*

*No, no, there is no hope, only pain. Let me die! Please? Grant me death and release from this anguish, please?* The large dragon began to thrash about again.

Realizing that she was about to give in to the darkness, that she would never be able to come back from the black pit of despair, Amanda knew she had to do something. Taking a chance, Amanda leapt forward onto the lowered head of the large dragon. Holding onto her and sobbing wildly now, she called out in her mind to her once again.

*Please, oh please, please ... do not give in to the darkness. Do not give in to the despair; please, please let me help you. I know it will get better, I know for I passed through that darkness; and now I have a life again. Please, please, let me help you sweet dragon;* Amanda screamed out in despair.... **DON'T LEAVE ME!!**

Those last words, the cry of desperation, were what finally penetrated thru to some point in the consciousness of the grieving dragon. She felt Amanda's love touch her mind; her eyes cleared and sanity returned. She felt Amanda holding onto her; but more important, she felt the pain that Amanda had felt and was still feeling.

*Even in your pain, you would do this for me?* She asked softly.

*Oh yes!* Amanda answered sobbing; *I will never leave you!* Amanda knew in saying this that she was accepting this dragon as her own. She only hoped that in her pain the anguished dragon would not reject her. *Perhaps we can help each other!*

Abruptly the scene below was enveloped in a bright light. Vail watched from above understanding what had just taken place. Amanda and the dragon had finally connected on a level unknown to humans. Slowly the dragon was lifted into the air along with Amanda. Bright white light penetrated thru them both and they were suspended in the air facing each other.

Jake's voice boomed out and could be heard by all.

*Dragon! Behold your new rider, the Lady Amanda. Rider! Behold your new dragon, the Lady Elise. Bind yourselves to each other in peace and love.*

A bright light shot out of Lady Elise and engulfed Amanda - the bonding began. They connected minds and both shared the pain of their loss, and the joy of finding each other. Knowing that she had suffered the same fate and had overcome it eased the Lady Elise back to sanity. It was Amanda's great love that had finally reached her and brought her back from the edge of madness. This realization had bonded them together as dragon and rider. Before the assembled dragons, enhancement began. Lady Elise wrapped her wings around Amanda and accepted her as her rider. So began the sharing of knowledge - Amanda began to understand all that happened to her up to this point in time. Visions of past and present floated thru her mind; she saw things that she would do, people she would meet. A vision of Vail appeared before her and his love for her was evident. Her love for Lady Elise, exposing her vulnerability and fighting to bring the dragon back all came together as Amanda was changed forever. An explosion of white light brought her back to the present, as they were both slowly lowered to the ground.

Amanda immediately went to Lady Elise's side and inspected her leg wound.



*We need help here. Jake, Lady Elise must be brought to Dragon's Hill for treatment. Stroking Lady Elise gently she told her, There, there, my sweet friend, we will get you home so Jake can heal you.*

*Struggling to rise up, the wounded dragon lowered her head to Amanda and called out to her, I am the Lady Elise, mate to Essex, First Wing to the mighty Valotin! You are my rider, my companion, and my friend. Your great love has saved me, and I pledge you my loyalty and my love.*

*Amanda wrapped her arms around the massive head of her new dragon. I will never leave you my sweet Lady Elise!*

*Hovering above and watching what was taking place, Essex gave a loud roar of 'Approval'. It seems that I shall finally have a mate my friend; your Lady has done well. This is a very good thing. Vail always appreciated the way Essex thought. We are doubly blessed!*

*Essex, nothing surprises me anymore. I am just happy that that beautiful dragon could be reached. It would have been a terrible thing to lose so beautiful a creature, Vail replied.*

*Indeed my friend, indeed! A somber Essex agreed quickly.*

*Alakar and Valotin landed and sized up the situation quickly. Speaking with Lady Elise, the two giants gently eased themselves under her wings and rose slowly. Essex landed and Vail called to Amanda to climb on behind him and they followed the procession back to Dragons Hill. Upon their return Amanda went to her dragon's side and refused to leave her.*

*Essex finally calmed her fears by saying he would remain with Lady Elise through the night. Coming forward he offered his neck to her, and in entwining her neck with his, Lady Elise accepted Essex as her mate.*

*Vail took Amanda to their quarters for some well deserved rest. It was only after she had calmed down that Amanda became aware of the changes in Vail. She was most pleased and told him so; Vail was not upset at the changes with her either. They spent the evening lying in each other's arms thankful that they had each other.*

Two months later found the new riders and their dragons in excellent condition. They had been schooled in a new fighting style. And as Elizabeth had promised, each pair was a force to be reckoned with. Sarah had taught them well as their skills with the crossbow were deadly.

Due to the attentions of her rider, Lady Amanda, and her mate, Essex; Lady Elise healed quickly and was ready for 'First Flight'. Lady Valeria, who had grown strong, was also ready for 'First Flight' with her rider, Lady Elizabeth. The two dragons and their riders would take the flight together. Valotin called both riders to the plateau and informed them of what was to take place. Two hours later they returned changed women, and members of that unique group known as Riders of Light!

Valotin called the riders and told them of the plans he and Alakar and Ichor had agreed upon. They would make their preparations and leave for Peru in a fortnight. Once there they would concentrate on finding the riders they would need. It was decided that there would be three clutches. Lady Valeria, Lady Anya, and Lady Isabol would mate and lay their eggs in the safety of Machu Picchu. Dreams had been sent and the residents of the target community, and they would be expecting their arrival.

Terry worried about leaving his dogs for so long and went to Peter and asked if he could return for them, before they left for Peru. Steve constructed a rig for Lady Drucilla similar to the one he made for Lady Jennie. Terry was very grateful and he and Sean left one morning and returned just before noon. The dogs had greeted their friend with loud barks and whines; they had missed their master. Lady Drucilla informed the dogs of what was expected of them, and they jumped into the holders and quieted. At the end of the 'ride', they were cold, but otherwise in good condition. Terry breathed a sigh of relief that his little friends were safe. Halfway down the mountain the beautiful hounds spotted Oreo – and the race was on! They chased her, and she them for over an hour. In exasperation Terry finally went to Lady Sally and begged her help. He was worried that Oreo would 'eat' the noisy dogs. In the end Rah was consulted. Chuckling, he told them not to worry that they were in the field with the horses. Terry found them in the field just as Rah had said; Oreo and the dogs were rolling about 'playing' with each other. After that, Terry wasn't worried about his friends at all.

Time passed quickly and soon the day of departure was upon them. With great pride Master Jeffery gave a copy of the Dragon Chronicles to James as he promised he would. Sam had prepared a feast for them the night before they left. There was sadness at leaving their newfound friends; but also great anticipation of the future that lay before them.

They gathered up their things and packed carefully, bringing some food to tide them over, just in case. James and Elizabeth had said their good-byes to Daniel and Kate, and Jake, and the other riders. Privately, each rider had gone to Jake the night before to personally seek his counsel, and thank him.

At a signal from James, they mounted their dragons and looked to Valotin for instruction. In a booming voice he called out to them, *Riders! Dragons! To the heights!*

They rose in unison, a large dark mass heading above to the thermal currents. In seconds there were gone.

Below dark intelligent eyes twirled, *God's speed Valotin my brother! It begins again!*

On the other side of the world, in a sleepy town nestled in the lush mountainous region of Peru, a small band of rather elderly men and women awoke with a great air of expectancy. Meeting on the veranda of the town's only cafe, as was their custom each morning, the small band relayed their dreams of the previous evening. Elliott opened his large book and began going over the previous dreams that they had all been receiving.

"So, this is it then, they are coming. Dee, did you get the names of the riders?" Since deciding to keep records, Elliott could no longer deny that there was something very powerful at work here and over time had become a true believer. He knew that Dee and Lee Chin were the ones who seemed to be more intuitive, and were able to pick up on details the others seemed to miss.

"Yes Elliott," she said quickly as she looked around at her friends, "the one in charge is called James; he rides Valotin, the lead Dragon. And his mate, wife, whatever, is Elizabeth, she rides Lady Valeria." She was grinning in a wide smile, "and there are more!" She looked to Lee Chin and nodded.

"Most assuredly yes, there are many more. The large scarlet dragons are Ichor and Lady Isabol; Sarah and Jackson ride them. And the ones from Europe are the dark reddish brown Alakar ridden by Peter. His mate Cicely rides Lady Annya, Alakar's mate. The second in command to James is Vail, he rides the deep green Essex; his mate Amanda rides Lady Elise. Do you see the pattern?"

"Wait, I'm still writing all this down," Elliott was going as fast as he could to get all the information down.

"Yes, I see it," shouted Cedric, "look at the names of the dragons. Each dragon and mate seems to have the same letter beginning his or her name: Alakar, Annya, Essex, Elise, Ichor, Isobol, Valotin, and Valeria! Do you see?"

"Perhaps that's how it is with dragons," guessed Gregor, a retired KGB agent, "we do not know for sure how these things take place. We have all had dreams of seeing eggs, and riding dragons, but the history and philosophy of these beasts is beyond our understanding as of yet. Perhaps when they arrive we will learn more."

Suddenly Dee and Lee Chin both went rigid; looking off in the distance at something the others could not see. After several minutes they relaxed and both shouted at the same time, "they've taken to the air, they're on their way!"

"Lets get to your observatory Cedric," Dee called rising out of her chair, "I want to see these dragons!" The elderly group headed up a well-worn path to a small hut on the plateau above their town.

# REBUILD

Valotin slowed and eased himself out of the thermal current with his fellow dragons' right behind him. Shortly after, sixteen very large dragons hovered on high above the South American continent.

*Dragons! Look below at your new home. Essex, Juztin, use those sharp eyes of yours and survey the area. Tell me what you see.*

Below them stretched out the lush green canopy of the jungle. This was the last, great rain forest in the world; virtually untouched by the burning devils on their sweep thru this area. There was easier prey for them on the other continents and they could not be bothered trying to hunt their prey thru the thick foliage; so they burned small areas. Over the years the rain forest encroached on and swept over the scorched areas, filling it in. Human eyes could not see thru the great canopy, but the dragons of light could. They saw all the areas the devils had touched with their hot breath.

*There's no signs of dragons on this continent my liege, said Essex, thus acknowledging Valotin as their leader. Ah, the area is lush with game, and there are many caves in the high reaches.*

*My liege, called Lady Elise, there is a small group of humans heading for the plateau above the town you spoke of. They are heading towards a small dwelling. Ah yes, they are trying to see what we look like thru one of their telescopes. How sweet of them.*

*Let us show them our full might my brothers and sisters, bellowed Valotin. We descend in a spiral so they may come to terms with their dreams.*

Below in the hut there was a riotous commotion going on, each wanting to see the dragons in the sky. Cedric was lining up the telescope when he suddenly went white as a ghost.

"My God, they are real!" He turned to Elliott, "Look!"

One by one the elderly men and women looked thru the scope and saw the huge dragons spiraling down to their location. They came out of the hut and stood on the plateau looking upward with mouths agape; watching the dragons descend.

"Look, they're coming right at us!" yelled Elliott.

"No, they're making for the plateau above, it's bigger and can handle all of them," Gregor shouted.

Dee and Lee Chin were moving in the direction of the plateau, "well come on you old fools, lets go greet them," she shouted at them.

The little group scurried to get to the top before the dragons landed.

As Valotin circled the plateau he could see the elderly residents making their way up a path to the plateau below him. *James, we have a welcoming committee coming our way. Amanda, can you see your friends below?*

*Oh yes Valotin, they are all alive, thank God! I have worried about them. A jubilant Amanda answered. There's Dee, and Cedric, and Elliott!*

*Essex and Lady Elise will land first. Valotin ordered. Ichor and Lady Isobol please scout the area. Let yourselves be seen by the natives below. Your scarlet color will confirm one of their legends and fulfill a prophecy. They will honor you with arrows of fire; flame the arrows to show acceptance.*

*As you wish my brother, it shall be a spectacular show.* Sarah and Jackson grinned at the thought of being considered a legend. They were soon lost from sight over the jungle.

Essex and Lady Elise glided in and landed on the plateau near the pathway the residents were coming up. Amanda climbed down and Vail joined her. She took off her riding helmet and was removing her jacket when Dee climbed onto the plateau. Amanda turned around to face her, shook her hair free and smiled as she began to walk towards her.

“Well, aren’t you going to say hello Dee? It’s me, Mandy!”

Dee stood there for a moment marveling at the change in her friend, she came forward hesitantly and then threw her arms around her.

“Good God girl, look at you!” She held her at arms length, “you look fantastic, and you’re so much younger!” She hugged her friend, “it’s the dragons no doubt; and who is this gorgeous young stud?” Vail looked at Amanda with bemused questioning eyes. “Oh he really is beautiful.”

Cedric and Elliott reached the threesome, “Mandy? Is it really you?”

“Of course it’s her you two idiots!” Gregor pushed past them and gave her a big bear hug.

“It’s good to see all of you; please,” taking Vail’s hand Amanda continued, “may I present Vail, second in command to James.” Vail made a short bow of acknowledgement, and took Dee’s hand and kissed it, looking up at her he winked, and she roared with laughter and gave him a hug.

“We’re going to get along just fine. Oh you are a rakish devil, I just love it!” She told a laughing Vail.

Just then Vail saw Valotin start his landing. “Ladies and gentlemen, landing over there on the plateau is Valotin, Third of the Ancients - Dispenser of Justice! He is the reason we are all here. He is the reason we will all get a chance to save this world of ours. Riding him is James, leader of the Riders of Light. Behind him lands his Warrior Queen, Lady Valeria. She is ridden by James mate, the Lady Elizabeth.” The other dragons landed and their riders climbed off and stayed by their dragon’s side. Valotin and Lady Valeria were just behind Essex and Lady Elise.

Lee Chin stood watching as James and Elizabeth climbed down. He then came forward and bowed low in the Oriental way and greeted Valotin using his mind; *Welcome, welcome to Valotin, Dispenser of Justice. I have dreamt of you many times mighty one.*

Valotin rose and lowered his head to Lee Chin, who showed no fear, *I accept your greeting Lee Chin, He Who Sees. I am very aware of you also. You must ask your people if I may address them, etiquette demands I have their permission first.*

Lee Chin bowed again and then went to his friends, “He wishes to speak to all of us, but he says he must have permission first.”

Amanda explained further, “Valotin speaks to you in your mind, telepathically; Dragon etiquette demands that he have your permission first. It would be unthinkable for a dragon to enter your mind without permission. What do you say guys?”

Elliott spoke for all of them; “we haven’t come this far to walk away now my dear girl.”

She led them over to the large dragon and seconds later they all heard Valotin's booming voice speaking to them. Eyes went wide in astonishment, and soon great smiles spread across the faces of the former spies.

*We bring you greetings from the Dragons of Light. We have returned to the earth to protect and serve man again. We are here to build up a mighty fighting force to wage war with the black devils that have nearly destroyed our world. James and Elizabeth will answer any questions you have and a copy of the Dragon Chronicles will explain everything else.*

Valotin gave a loud roar of 'Approval' and took to the air. He raced up to the heights and then dove at lightening speed and zoomed by the plateau so fast they were bowled over by the wind currents behind him.

"Good show!" yelled Cedric, "Amazing creature, absolutely magnificent." They watched as Valotin soared above the ocean and turned and dived down into it. Huge plumes of water rose into the air as he entered the water. Seconds later he was followed by Lady Valeria.

The riders quickly unloaded their things and placed them on the ground so their dragons could join Valotin. The two large wolfhounds jumped down and went running about barking and smelling everything. Terry was having trouble keeping them near and then remembered what Lady Sally told him. He called to Lady Drucilla for help and she called them over to her. She explained that they mustn't be so noisy. Then she sent them on a mission to explore the jungle and see what they could find out about the area. She promised Terry that she would keep an eye on them. Then she joined her friends in the ocean. There were loud roars and splashing as the great beasts dove in and cooled themselves off. The natives standing on the shore were in total awe of such an impressive sight. They quickly sent a runner to tell their Shaman of the arrival of the great beasts. He had been expecting them for some time.

James and Elizabeth came over to the small group and introduced themselves. Amanda introduced each of the elderly group to the dragon riders. Before she could continue Elliott stopped her.

"Riders, one moment please. Would you follow us down to the meeting hall? Everyone is waiting for you there." James looked questioningly at Elliott. "We couldn't all climb up here you see. I imagine they are having a time of it watching your dragons cavorting in the ocean. So I think we need to get down there quickly." Elliott waved the riders over and ushered them in the direction of a well-worn path.

Dee took Vail's arm and winked at Amanda. "You did very well Amanda; this young man is just the type I use to seduce in my earlier days. He is quite magnificent; you are a very lucky woman!"

Vail coughed and tripped over his feet as he looked back at Amanda. She caught him before he fell, "I told you they were characters. This is nothing; wait till they really get started," Amanda chuckled.

"We have prepared eight houses for your riders on the plateau below," Cedric informed James, pointing to them. "We thought they would want to be near their dragons. I hope that was ok, I mean you are staying correct?"

"Oh yes Cedric, we will be here for at least a year." James reassured him, "we have eggs to lay and hatch; and we have riders to prepare for battle," he said smiling at Cedric.

“By Jove, I knew it!” Cedric was beaming, “this is a bit of all right. Lee Chin said it was so, but some of us were still a bit skeptical. I can’t explain it, but I could ‘see’ myself on one of those marvelous beasts.”

“They are a lot more than just beasts Cedric,” James told him in a soft voice, “they are our friends and brothers. You will come to understand that in the future. And their friendship will fill you like nothing else.”

James looked over the little group of elderly ex-spies moving among his riders. Amanda had described them very well. He watched as they went among his riders actively searching for information and using their wiles on his people.

Dee, still quite spry for 80 plus, caught his attention. She walked with Vail and Amanda. Her hair was still lush and curly and deep auburn red, (no doubt due to Miss Clairol). It was obvious that she had been quite a beauty in her day. Her ample figure was still trim and he could see where the curves had once been. Amanda said that she had been one of the ‘Ghosts’ – a super-secret group of four invisible spies. Never seen, never captured, never even identified.... yet capable of retrieving information with the victims never the wiser.

As James turned, he caught a look and slight movement from Lee Chin to Dee. It was ever so slight; he might never have seen it had he not been turning in their direction. He also noticed a certain softening of Lee Chin when he was around Dee. *Aha*, James thought triumphantly, *I believe I know one of your secrets!*

Studying Lee Chin, James guessed that he was one of the ‘Ghosts’, also. He was about 5’11” and he could see that his physique was still strong and wiry, probably due to great discipline and constant training. He must have had a strong powerful body in his day. His long white hair was tied back with a red scarf, (no doubt Dee’s). He reminded James of the Samurai warriors of long past.

As the large group entered the meeting hall, the residents sat quietly. James could see that many of the elderly ex-spies were well into their 80’s and 90’s; but all were clear eyed and alert. *Their bodies may be frail and old, but their minds are strong*, thought James.

Cedric went up to a little podium and began by introducing James and Elizabeth. James then stepped forward and introduced the rest of the riders. He listened carefully and was pleased at the reactions of the elderly residents.

“So that is James, quite impressive; he rides the lead dragon you know...”

“Look how beautiful Elizabeth is, will we be like her I wonder...”

“It is our Mandy, she has come home and look who she brought with her...”

“Look, look, there is Terrance, he’s the chef I told you about...”

“There’s Reggie and Cynthia, they are like we used to be my dear...”

After a few minutes James addressed the little group. “My friends, I thank you for your welcome, we all thank you. I would also like to thank you for your patience in waiting for us. I know the dreams were a little vague in some things, and very detailed in others. They were sent by one who knows which of you will remember what. When you all finally confided in one another and put the dreams together, each of you contributed to give a whole picture. Is that not so?”

There were many ‘Yes, yes..’ echoing around the small group.



**“The black devils that destroyed our world are in hibernation somewhere in Germany. They are out of commission for the next six months or so. It is during this time that we intend to play catch-up. The three lead dragons will mate with their Queens, and we hope to get three good size clutches as a result. There are about 15 to 20 eggs in each clutch. Any questions so far?”**

**Hands went up immediately across the room. James pointed to the tall elderly white haired gentlemen on his right, “Yes sir?”**

**“Nigel here, late of MI5, you say three clutches of 15 to 20 eggs each. That’s 45 to 60 eggs sir; there are only 20 of us here. Where do you propose to get the other people?”**

**“That is already being taken care of, Nigel. There is another settlement we plan to call upon. Also, you all have friends that you keep in touch with thru your short wave radios, correct?”**

**“Well, yes we do,” said Nigel looking about the room, “but there are only a few of them, maybe 10 in all.”**

**“Have they also been having dreams, and if you haven’t asked them, well, now would be a good time don’t you think? James said gently.**

**“Yes! Yes we will. The next schedule contact is this evening at 7:00pm. We’ll ask, and if the answer is what you say it will be; we’ll fill them in on everything.”**

**“I shall be glad to help, Nigel!” shouted Cedric.**

**“That still leaves a great many eggs sir,” a female voice said. James turned quickly around and almost fell over a diminutive oriental woman. She deftly moved out of his way as he stumbled for a moment. Her features were like delicate porcelain, she reminded him of the dolls you buy at Chinese Restaurants.**

**James bowed in the Oriental manner and answered her, “Jake has been preparing others and when they are needed we will go and retrieve them.” He looked at her and smiled, her eyes held an unasked question. “It is not our task to free your homeland, sweet lady; other dragons have that honor. The Blue Dragons of the Wolf Clan will join with the Samurai Clan of Japan. They will sweep across Asia bringing back order and peace once again.”**

**“May I live to see such a wondrous thing; to walk in the Gardens of the Temple once again would be most pleasant.” Bowing to James she introduced her self. “I am called Mai. Your great friends are a joy to watch.” She indicated the dragons flying about in the sky above them.**

**“I shall be sure to tell them that, they will appreciate it gracious lady.” She bowed to him and returned to her table. As she stood there she clapped her delicate hands and called the room to order. The native staff began to come out of the kitchen area with large platters of food. There was a large selection of delicious fruits, an avocado salad dish served first. The main dish was baked fish with a hint of lemon and garlic that melted in their mouths. There was also a cooked rice dish that was heaven. There was lemon water all around and tea for those who wished.**

**The natives were all in awe of the riders and their large friends. They kept kneeling down holding huge platters of food above their heads when they served any of them. It was Amanda who finally convinced them that it was unnecessary. ‘The riders are here to help and they must not be singled out in this manner,’ she told them; this they understood. But it didn’t stop them from occasionally looking out to the bay at the dragons diving in the water.**

Nigel and Cedric seemed to be the resident historians. They explained to James that several years ago a group of very nasty mercenaries came thru this area burning, raping, and killing every village they came across. The Shaman of this little band of natives warned the elderly ex-spies and told them to flee for their lives. He was unaware of who these elderly people were, or used to be. They were not about to be chased out of their own homes by the likes of this vermin; so they decided to take matters into their own hands. They set up a little welcoming committee for these thugs, and a surprise for their leader. None of them were ever seen again. The natives were so appreciative that the oldsters were given a place of honor in their village hierarchy, and the Shaman decreed that they would care for the elderly residents until their deaths.

At one of the tables, Terry was going on and on about the fish; the rice dish and so forth. He asked who cooked the fish so he could personally compliment the fellow. The delicate Lady Mai slowly rose and made her way to his table beaming with pride.

Cedric whispered to James and Elizabeth while indicating with a nod, “the Lady Mai knows Terrance was once one of the premier chefs in Europe. She has both of the cookbooks he wrote. He is the only Westerner who can make ‘Lee-pan’, a delicate Chinese pastry. She has tried unsuccessfully several times. Ever since she found out he was in your group she has been in a tizzy. She personally saw to the luncheon today, this should be very interesting.”

James quickly relayed the situation to Valotin and asked him to let Terry know who this woman was, and also of her desire to meet him. James watched as Terry smiled and winked at him in acknowledgement.

As Lady Mai reached the table, Terry and Sean rose immediately and bowed to her in the Oriental way. Terry complimented her on the rare taste of the fish, and went on and on about the delicate sauce. Lady Mai was beaming with pride. He asked her to join him, and she accepted graciously. He spoke with her of cooking, and kept her enthralled for a half hour. It was then that she broached the subject of ‘Lee-pan’ and held her breath.

“Of course!” Terry agreed quickly, “You know there are so few who really appreciate what a delicacy it is. If you have all the ingredients I shall be thrilled to prepare it for you, and also show you my little secret. But you must promise to share it with no one.” As she left the table beaming, Lady Mai had tears in her eyes.

*You have done well my Terry, I am proud of you. You have touched the heart of this lady.* Lady Drucilla complimented him.

James came over and bent close, “I think you made that lady very happy Terry. Thank you, she is someone very special.”

James returned to his table and overheard Elizabeth asking, “With a group like yours, who would be the person who receives information and disseminates it? Do you choose a new person each year?”

“Ah, how delicate of you my dear; what you really mean who is who is in charge? I thought it was obvious.” Cedric winked at Elizabeth, “Elliott runs the show. He likes to keep in the back round and size up the situation first. You know, fly on the wall and all that sort of rubbish.”

“There’s no fooling these people,” Elliott stepped forward, “habit my dear.” He took Elizabeth’s hand and kissed it, “I certainly hope our ladies become as beautiful as you.”

“Sir, your charms will not work on me, I am on to you!” Elizabeth chuckled.

James came over to his side, “Elliott, I would like to meet with you and your key group later, we have much to go over.”

“Yes, I was going to suggest the same thing.” Elliott sized up James quickly and decided he liked him. Vail came over to James with Amanda and had a word. He and James then strolled off to one side and were lost in deep conversation.

Elliott stared at them intently. “I say Mandy, he reminds me of someone I once knew. Can’t put my finger on it, give me a moment and I’ll get it.”

Amanda immediately took Elliot’s arm and steered him away from Vail.

Elliott was racking his brain trying to remember who this young man reminded him of...”Ah, of course! Lord Haverton, 5<sup>th</sup> Earl of Wessex.” Elliott looked at Amanda, “My dear,” he said picking up on her actions, “is it a sore subject? Please believe me, I did not mean to cause any embarrassment to the young man. I applaud his striking out on his own; his father was a bully and a bore. I never liked him.”

“It is a subject best left alone, Elliott. There was a great rift between them, but that is all in the past. Vail is an entirely different person.” Amanda smiled sweetly.

“My dear Amanda, from what I have learned of the Dragons, he must be a man of great honor. Else wise they would have nothing to do with him.” Elliott patted her hand, smiling he said, “Do not worry, I shall not bring up the subject again.”

“Thank you Elliott, I appreciate your discretion.” They turned around and made their way back to the group.

Elliott went over to James, “well now, shall we get you all settled in your new homes. You can store all your things, and if there is time James, I should like to meet your large friend. Oh, and if possible make a big to-do about the huts. The natives went all out preparing them for you. You may not see them, but I assure you they will be watching.”

Elliott, Cedric, Dee, Lee Chin and Nigel led them up a pathway to the plateau above. There were eight large huts overlooking the small village below. The huts were constructed of tightly woven thatched roofs, and adobe-like walls with large open ‘windows’ to allow the free flow of air. They were all very large and the floors were made of the same tightly woven thatch mats. There were chairs and tables and large beds for the riders. There were hanging baskets of beautiful hibiscus, tree orchids about each hut. Above them was a very large plateau with huge caves that the dragons would use as hatching grounds. Many of the dragons were already on the plateau sprawled out sunning themselves.

The five elderly former spies looked on in admiration. “They are absolutely magnificent. Their colors and sizes are astounding.” Cedric spoke what they were all feeling. “I could stand here all day looking at them.”

Each pair of riders claimed their huts and went about their business of unloading their possessions. There were loud shouts of appreciation from several of the riders. James made a point of coming out of his and thanking Elliott for all the work that had been put into construction it. Elizabeth complimented Elliott about the beautiful flowers and how well the huts were constructed. Elliott caught a glimpse of slight movement in the jungle; and he knew that this news had been received well.

The two wolfhounds came bounding out of the jungle, their fur covered in a yellowish pollen-like substance. They made a beeline to the hut that Terry and Sean had claimed. Terry greeted them and quieted them down and directed them to Lady Drucilla. The little group of residents watched as the dogs ran to a beautiful creamy grayish-blue dragon. She lifted her massive body and turned her head and lowered it to the animals. The dogs stood before her as if they were listening to her. After some time they returned to the hut. They laid themselves down on the landing by the doorway. They were soon sound asleep as they were exhausted by all the new activity.

Terry came out of the hut and sought out Peter. “Lady Drucilla says that the dogs found no sign of any clutches; or any dragon droppings in the area. They found an old plane wreck, but there was no scent of any kind. They did say that they felt like they were being watched, but they saw no one, and smelled nothing. I think they did rather well for the first outing, don’t you think?”

“Yes Terry, now that they can communicate with Lady Drucilla, they just may become useful.” He slapped Terry on the back, “you were right in insisting they come along; now we at least have an idea of what is in the area. I’ll let James know what’s going on, thank you, Terry.”

The five oldsters conferred with each other on this bit of news. “They can talk to animals too, this is something new.”

Dee chided them, “You old fools; they probably know what we are saying right now. They are telepathic you know!” All five of them turned towards the dragons. It was Valotin who raised his head and met their stares. Then they heard him chuckle in a low booming voice. The small group turned white, eyes wide in alarm and quickly made their way towards Amanda.

Elizabeth called to James, *it seems our inquisitive hosts have caught the eye of Valotin, my love.*

James smiled in Elizabeth’s direction. *They are just being what they have always been my dear, information gatherers. Imagine what they will be like when they become riders. We will have a formidable army; I just hope we will be able to handle them.*

*Oh James, come look at them, they’re trying to casually walk over to Amanda and Vail’s hut, Elizabeth chuckled, oh they are so cute!*  
They continued to watch as the fearless five finally caught Amanda’s eye and she came and rescued them.

A few minutes later James approached Elliott and nodded, “Want to meet Valotin, formally?”

“Are you kidding?” Elliott wasn’t trying to conceal his enthusiasm any more, “of course!”

“There are certain forms of etiquette we always observe when addressing the dragons,” James explained. “You always bow slightly before the one you wish to speak to. That way the others know to close off their minds and leave you in privacy. It is a courtesy they all observe.”

As they reached the top of the dragon’s plateau Elliott realized just how big these creatures were. His mind had tried to prepare him for this, but the scale was too large. He was in total awe of these majestic beasts. James went up to Valotin; and Elliott watched as he interacted with the huge behemoth. He bowed and the dragon nodded and lowered his head. James then threw his arms around the massive head and hugged the beast. There was a strong ‘feeling’ of love and companionship all about. It engulfed Elliott and he began to understand a little of how deeply the bond between rider and dragon was. James seemed to be in deep discussion with Valotin, and then he turned and called Elliott over.

Elliott stood before the huge creature, eyes wide in awe. He bowed as he had seen James do and he thought to himself, *my God you are the most amazing creature I have ever seen.*

*Almost immediately he heard in his mind, of course I am Sir Elliott; the Creator never does things on a small scale. You have done very well here. At an inner urging, one that you could never acknowledge to anyone, you secured this place for your fellow spies. In your limited understanding of what is right and wrong, you even offered sanctuary to one who truly needed it.*

*Surprised suddenly flashed across Elliott's face as Valotin continued. Thru your dreams, you comprehended the need and prepared your people to receive us in good faith. The jungle natives believe Ichor is the reincarnation of their 'god' Quetzal. Things will go smoothly now. You have done very well indeed!*

*It was you I was dreaming about! All those conversations we had - they really happened! My God, you and Jake have been directing me all along. Elliott laughed out loud and slapped his thigh. You had me doing exactly what you wanted! Good show old man! I am honored to be in such illustrious company.*

A little while later James came and retrieved Elliott and led him off the plateau in a trance; he had a huge grin on his face.

As they headed back Valotin called to him, *James, something watches from the jungle. I sense fear and wonder. Ask Elliott tonight to tell you about what he hides in the jungle.*

Later that evening James, Peter, Vail and Sarah met with the small group at Elliot's house. Most of the other elderly residents went to bed shortly after dusk. These five were the 'night owls' of the community. Dee met them at the door and showed them into Elliott's study. It was a large room with several leather chairs, and a large leather couch. There was a huge picture window that looked out onto the Bay. Scotch and whiskey were passed around as they settled themselves.

"Cheers gentlemen," Vail toasted them, "shall we begin?" Heads nodded all around, "We have brought a copy of the Dragon Chronicles with us, if you read it, it will answer most of your questions."

Nigel spoke up first, "The information is correct; all of it really happened, word for word?" James nodded, as did the others. "I scanned it rather quickly last night, unbelievable! But if what you say is true then we can assume that the same will happen here, more or less."

Cedric added, "I too scanned it. I don't mind saying that the thought of being young once again holds a great deal of pleasure for this old man. We have discussed this 'gift' of the dragons at great length among ourselves."

Dee now picked up the conversation; "what you described in the chronicles, the sharing between riders and dragons... it sounds very metaphysical and very inviting. With it comes great responsibility, we know, but it is the bonding with the dragons that has us hesitant. We have spent our entire lives never sharing our inner selves with anyone. Occasionally," she said barely looking towards Lee Chin with a hint of a smile on her face, "one of us might find that perfect person to share with, but it does not happen often. This holds us back, as we would not want to jeopardize your mission."

Sarah sat up and looked at James, "let me?" A nod from James and she answered Dee softly, "that won't even come into question when you make contact, Dee. There are no words to adequately describe what happens. That first contact, that first touch to your mind," she said breathlessly remembering, "There is nothing like it!" The riders all smiled and nodded, remembering.

Lee Chin and Dee exchanged short looks, each affirming the answer to the other. They held each other's eyes for just a moment, James caught it and was now convinced more than ever that there was a great deal more to these two than met the eye.

Nigel spoke up, "all right then, what's your game plan, and how may we help you?"

"Valotin and Lady Valeria will take to the skies for the mating flight. James told them, "of course, Elizabeth and I will be gone for a day or two with them. When we return, Lady Valeria will head to the hatching grounds where she will lay her eggs."

Peter picked it up here, "when they return, Alakar and Lady Annya along with myself and Cicely will and do the same. All the dragons have been busy clearing the caves and deepening them to prepare them properly as hatching grounds."

Sarah sat forward. "Ichor and Lady Isabol will leave after they return along with Jackson and myself. We will return with a very heavy queen. She will head straight for the hatching grounds."

"During this time the rest of the dragons will fly patrol and keep an eye on the skies at all times," Vail interjected. "We can not afford any hint of our presence to be known to any wandering dragon. As First Wing, Essex and I shall see to the safety of the Queens at all times."

**“We are well aware of the duplicity of the black devils; they shall not take us unaware,” James added. “We shall be the ones with the surprise this time around.” James voice now took on a serious tone, “As you read in the chronicles, dragon riders have no secrets from each other. We are all brothers and sisters - family. I now ask two of you a question,” James turned and looked at Dee and Lee Chin, “are you both psychic and telepathic? I have a good reason to ask, our survival may depend on it.” He waited for an answer.**

**Dee and Lee Chin looked at each, and then Dee’s face broke into a smile, “Yes, we both share a small gift.”**

**“Good! Your spy games are over; dragon games will begin when Valotin returns from the mating flight. If you are both willing, he will teach you a different way to apply your abilities; and God willing, we will have the upper hand in dealing with enemy! Also, your abilities will be greatly enhanced when you bond with your dragon egg.”**

**James took a long sip of his whiskey, “Once the eggs are laid they will start to grow quickly. Between two to three weeks later some of your people may start to have dreams about very specific dragons. They will be able to describe it to you, color and all. Some, though rare, may even hear a small child calling them. Keep your eyes and ears open to any changes in your people, as it will indicate who our riders are to be. You yourselves are included in this also.”**

**“What is your enemy like James; his attack tactics, strength, etc,” Elliott asked.**

**Peter sat forward in his chair, “When you read the Chronicles properly you will be made aware of the different levels of madness. This particular bastard is mad as a hatter - but he’s smart and a shrewd planner. He attacks viciously and then leaves only to return a few hours later, we painfully learned that lesson.” Peter’s face betrayed his pain, James picked up the conversation.**

**“He likes to come just before dawn, when you think you’re safest. He thinks he’s invincible; his ego will be his eventual undoing. But don’t underestimate him; he’s ruthless in dealing with his fellow dragons; they obey or he kills them quickly. What we have on our side right now is that he is snowed in and can’t get out. The severe cold will put him in a deep sleep till the spring thaw.” James looked at the faces of the elderly retirees took a sip of his drink and continued. “When he awakens, he will immediately be aware that there has been a shift in power. He will sense the three Ancients return, and he will send his minions out to scour the countryside in order to find our camp. Valotin doesn’t intend to give him a chance to reorganize. Hopefully, our forces will be ready by then. We plan on attacking him on three fronts; and we will not let up until he and his minions are destroyed.”**

**“What can we do for you right now?” Elliott asked.**

**“I’d like a quick rundown on your residents and their abilities.” James asked, “Also, get in touch with your people via short wave. See if any of their people are having dreams. Another thing before I forget, is that rich-boys school still up there in the Andes; you know the one I’m speaking of Elliott?”**

**“You know, I never even gave them a second thought, I have no idea. If they took a hit from the dragons on their sweep thru this area, I would have no way of knowing anyway. We could fly up there and check it out. I can show you where they’re located,” Elliott offered.**

**“You sneaky old goat Elliott!” Cedric said spontaneously, “You’ve been itching to ride one those dragons ever since you saw them.”**

**“You can’t fault me for trying old boy!” Elliott laughed.**

**“Gentlemen please, you can both go,” James informed them.**

**“As much as I would love to join you,” Cedric began, “my health would not allow me to go that high without an oxygen tank. No, I shall wait here.”**

**“By the time we go you may no longer have that problem Cedric. If you have bonded with an egg, your health and general appearance will have already started to change.” Peter informed him, “and there will be other changes too, but we can go over them later.”**

**“Now, about our little community...hmm...I guess the best way would be to give you my book of residents.” Elliott went to his desk and opened a side draw and took out a large leather bound journal. He handed it to James, “this will tell you everything you need to know about everyone here.”**

**They conversed in small groups for the next hour during which time Elliott pulled James aside, “James, in your reading when you come to ‘the experiment’; please try not to judge him too harshly; after all, he was simply a victim. What they did to him was a terrible violation, and then they tried to kill him to cover it all up. We decided among ourselves that we had to do something; so we did the only humane thing we could do. We made sure they thought he was dead; and then when we were sure they bought it - we brought him here to live out his life in relative peace. He seems happy, as happy as he can be I suppose. He wanders the jungle and seems to have found happiness in doing so. Occasionally he drops in to let me know that he is still alive; but Miss Emily would know more than I. They formed a very special friendship. I half expect to see him now that the dragons are here.”**

**“You have me very intrigued now. Exactly what happened to him, and why? All this is very mysterious.” James immediately picked up Valotin’s interest and explained to Elliott that he was listening to their conversation.**

**“Oh my, well of course! Ah, let’s see; he was just an ordinary man, nothing spectacular about him at all. He just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.” Nigel had come over and added to Elliott’s tale.**

**“You know how all governments have all sorts of secret labs and all that rot? I don’t know if it was long working hours, or the fact that they decided to cancel his experiments after years of work; but it appears that Prof Reed went quite mad. His work had to do with altering DNA at the molecular level and combining it with animal DNA. It was some sort of superhuman project. At long last it was ready to be tested on a human subject. The powers that be had decided to scrap the project; they told him that it was unfeasible.”**

**“Now I am intrigued,” said Vail, “please continue.”**

**“Well, that was when he snapped we think,” added Nigel “He never said a word, never argued with them; nothing. When they weren’t paying attention he set his plan in motion, right out in the open, so to say.” He went to a shopping center in the heart of London and attempted to kidnap a young woman. He didn’t count on the woman being an American; she fought back kicking and screaming. A man saw what was happening and came to the woman’s aid; very unfortunate for him, poor fellow.”**

**‘Refills gentlemen,’ asked Dee pouring another round for them all.**



Elliott picked up the conversation and continued, "Reed used a tranquilizer gun on the man, and took him back to his lab, ohh..." he said shuddering, "what he did to him was unspeakable, the worst kind of violation." He took a long drink and continued as the dragon riders hung on his words.

"He altered his DNA James, turned him into something part hawk and part something else. We were never able to get all the facts. Unexpectedly, the man broke free of his restraints - no doubt aided by his superhuman strength. His rage was terrible, he killed Reed, and horribly I might add. He burned the lab to the ground, and then he fled. The people in charge found out what Reed had been up to and called us back in to hunt the creature down and destroy it. We all knew enough of these secret organizations to know that they were trying to cover up; without any regard for the poor fellow."

Nigel took a long drink of his scotch. "It took us awhile, but what we found was a panic-stricken, frightened man on the verge of madness. He really is a very gentle person, despite his appearance. We decided that 'they' were wrong and offered him sanctuary here; he accepted. We were careful to make sure that they believed he was dead. I tried to duplicate Reed's experiment to see if I could reverse it, but I got nowhere. Almost all his notes were burned. The creature/man thanked me for trying, and left our community saying he felt safer in the jungle. When those marauders showed up several years ago, he was one of the surprises they ran into. After saving a native child from drowning, he took on the status of a god. The natives call him their protector, and they leave offerings for him in the high temple."

*He is outside listening to your conversation, Valotin informed James. He is curious about us, my friend. Ah, he has the dreams James, they come directly from Jake; he has been healing him.*

*Thank you my friend; I think we will let him come to us. When he is ready he will make himself known,* James told his large friend.

"As to the others, they're all here in this journal. I've included information about their former abilities, their former agencies, and etcetera. I was very thorough and meticulous so you would be very aware of your new army's capabilities," Elliott bragged. "If the enhancement takes place like it says in the Chronicles, then we will all be returned to full health and our eyesight will be as it once was. This is correct?" James nodded. "Well then, I can guarantee that you will have an army with the deadliest shots in all history."

"Thank you gentlemen, I shall go over this tonight. We are going to send out a few of the dragons to scout the area and to see what is out there. Would that pose a problem with your friend, Nigel?" James asked.

"If I am any judge of character, I would say no; he is probably listening to us right now." Nigel smiled, "don't bother to look, he could be standing right beside you and you wouldn't even notice. If he chooses to make himself known to you, he will do it in his own time, in his own way."

James stood up, "well gentlemen, and lady," James bowed slightly to Dee, "thank you for all your help. I think we shall call it a night. It has been a long day, and you all still need your rest. We will talk again tomorrow." Elliott came forward and shook James' hand, as did the others. James left and headed up to the plateau above deep in thought.

*You have company James, Valotin suddenly informed him. He keeps pace with you, and he is full of questions. Ah, he is gone.*

James continued on to the plateau, said goodnight to his fellow riders and went straight to his hut. Elizabeth had been busy fixing it up he noticed; her little touches had made it into a home. He set the journal down on a table and went to the bedroom.

She was lying on the bed reading. She looked up at him as he entered and he felt his heart beat a little faster. She was beautiful laying there, her hair loose and spread out on the pillow behind her. She still had that effect on him.

“How did it go James? Were they still mysterious and all?” she asked him.

“No, they were very open. They gave me a journal with information on every resident. Also a heads up on a very special resident; one that we have yet to meet.” James told Elizabeth all about the ‘experiment’ and what the residents had done to save him.

As Elizabeth listened to his tale she rose and made her way out to the veranda and stared up at the moon high above. The jungle was very quiet. “Oh James, that just wasn’t right! My God, how does one do that to a fellow human being?”

“Yes, it was a horrid thing to do, but I understand from Elliott that he has found peace here.” James held her close to him.

“Jake was right, we deserved to be destroyed, as human beings we had sunk very low,” she said in a small quiet voice. “We will never have anything like that in the world again, will we James?”

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” James said between clenched teeth.

Just then they both heard the sound of flapping wings. They looked above towards the direction of the sound and watched as something very large took to wing and flew away. “Did you see what it was? I only got a glimpse of it.”

*James my friend, I believe it was the same thing as before. I should like to meet this creature and understand him better, Valotin told James. He is very shy and carries much pain in his soul. Perhaps he will have to learn to trust us.*

*Thank you my friend, for looking out for us. Good night and sleep well.*

James looked in the direction of his large friend and saw him looking far into the distance. He turned and went into the hacienda and soon he and Elizabeth were asleep in each other’s arms.

The next few weeks were a haze of dragons flying off and returning; loud trumpets of ‘Approval’, and Queen dragons in the hatching grounds. The continent was patrolled far and wide by the dragons. They located a rather large herd of wildebeests, and another large herd of tapirs; they would not go hungry.

The little Shaman from the natives’ village made a special trip to the town and sought an audience with Ichor, believing him to be Quetzal returned. The meeting was conducted in great style and Lady Sarah and Jackson were heralded as the human forms of the great god. Sarah thought this a bit much.

After introductions the Shaman was told what was required of him and what changes to look for in his people. He was thrilled that he and his people would be a part of the ‘great battle for mankind’. He advised Ichor of the presence of the ‘Hawk-man’ who protects his village; he begged that the dragons accept him as he was a good spirit and had helped his village many times. Ichor told him not to worry, that he was well aware of the ‘hawk-man’ and had a special task for him. After that meeting the natives accepted the dragons with awe and respect and were no longer afraid to come up to the plateau. Whenever they passed one of the dragons though, they would bow low in recognition and chant something. Essex thought it was a hoot!

Almost four weeks later Elliott made his way to the café and found James and Vail sitting and enjoying some morning tea, waiting for him. “Good morning gentlemen,” he shouted as he waved, a large smile on his face, “I have some news. Miss Emily visited Nigel early last evening and said she was ‘hearing things’ and was wondering if she was entering senile dementia. She said she has been hearing little children talking and last night could have sworn she heard one call her name!” He looked to James and then to Vail; “this is so exciting! It’s actually happening!”

James placed the journal on the table and asked Elliott, “What is her full name? I’d like to get an idea of who she is and what she is like.”

“Miss Emily Watson, Assassin, and Director of Special Projects, and I might add an excellent engineer. It’s all there in the journal, I assure you.” Elliott was excited and anticipating the changes that were about to take place.

“Ah, here we go, Emily Watson, late of MI5. Started as a spy, within three months graduated to ghost assassin, 3 years later she became an assistant director to special projects. Mmm... she is quite an engineer, Elliott. Made all sorts of ‘toys’ for your deadly little group. She retired 10 years ago and settled right in here; she’s an avid bird watcher and artist.” James looked towards Elliott to see if he had anything to add.

“She is very quiet, quite shy actually. She hardly ever participates with us in any of the activities. Rather like a hermit, I suppose. I was worried about her for a while until I discovered that she had made friends with our ‘special’ guest. They visit at least two or three times a week with each other. They have a genuine friendship and seem to care about each other a great deal. Anything else you need?”

“Has she ever exhibited any ESP or psychic abilities before?” Vail asked quickly.

**“No, none whatsoever as far as I know; and I would know.” Elliott looked towards James.**

**James looked up from the journal, “just want to see if this is a true calling and not her picking up the little dragonets as they stir about in their eggs. From what you said she reported to Nigel, I’d have to say it is a true call. We have our first rider!”**

**Vail interjected, “We will need to pay a call on her and let her know what is happening, and what is expected of her.”**

**“She should know, or least has figured it out by now. Everyone has read the Dragon Chronicles, so they all know what to expect,” Elliott explained.**

**“That’s true Elliott, but when it happens to you, you will understand. Your mind will go blank and all you will be able to think about is your little dragonet. So I suggest we go and see the lady.”**

**“Very well, follow me please.”**

**Elliott took them thru the little town and around a bend and up a long slope to a ridge. As they reached the top James thought that he was back in England for a moment. There was a neatly manicured lawn and a rose garden around the front of a small cottage. There was a large fence overrun with vines that took off on both sides of the house framing it perfectly. “Wait till you see the back, gentlemen, it’s magnificent.”**

**Elliott rang the doorbell and shortly they heard a soft voice ask, “May I ask who is calling please?”**

**“It’s me Emily, Elliott. I have two of the dragon riders with me; they need to speak with you, love. It’s rather important.”**

**They stood there waiting for a minute or so and then heard a loud click. Elliott opened the front door and they entered into long hallway that led the length of the house. As they came around the corner they entered a fairyland. The whole backside of the house was opened to the jungle. There was a large patio that led to a grassy ridge. The ridge went out about thirty feet and took a sharp decline to a landing about ten feet below, and then again to another one ten feet below that. There were beautiful flowers, and hanging orchids everywhere. Colorful birds and butterflies were flying about. A tall, thin, sweet-faced white haired lady came forward and greeted them.**

**“Please come in, James, Vail, come and sit.” As James turned around he saw a huge painting on the wall behind Miss Emily of the birdman. It was plainly obvious that someone painted it with great love for the subject. Every feather, every detail was lovingly highlighted.**

**“I suppose you’re here because of the little one calling to me. I hope you intend to let me do something about it. I can’t go on like this much longer without answering the little thing.”**

**“That’s why we are here Miss Emily. We would like to take you to the hatching grounds so you can contact your dragon properly,” James told her. “Do you have any objections?”**

**“Of course not young man, I’ve been preparing all morning. I am looking forward to this with a great deal of excitement.” She sat down and put on her walking shoes; then stood and grabbed a wooden cane with a hawk’s head carved on the handle. Looking up at them she smiled, “Shall we go? Oh and Elliott, I wasn’t able to contact my friend. I really need to let him know where I am, he may become concerned.”**

I understand love,” he promised, “I’ll leave a note for him explaining everything,”

They slowly made their way up to the hatching grounds. As they stepped onto the plateau, Valotin was waiting for them. James explained to Miss Emily how to address Valotin and led her to him. Eyes wide and smiling from ear to ear she approached him slowly. She bowed slightly, leaning on the cane for support and she used her mind to address him.

*Good day mighty one. You are indeed a beautiful sight to behold!*

She said straining to look up at him. She stepped back a few paces so she could see him better. Valotin lowered his head to right in front of her.

*Good day to you, Lady Emily. I understand you hear one of my children calling to you.*

*Oh yes, I do hear her. Please may I go to her?* Miss Emily asked the hovering dragon.

*You must go into the hatching grounds and ask my Queen if you may see her eggs. She will allow you to pass if your egg is indeed in her clutch.* Valotin raised his head and nodded towards the cave entrance.

Looking back at James, who urged her to go ahead; Miss Emily slowly walked over to the cave and entered. She stood for a moment letting her eyes adjust to the darkness. She saw Lady Valeria standing before the second chamber.

“Oh my goodness!” she exclaimed.

Slowly the queen lowered her head and waited. Miss Emily stepped forward and bowed to the huge dragoness.

*You are as beautiful as your mate Lady Valeria, absolutely beautiful. I humbly ask permission to enter your hatching chamber. A small one calls for me, and I must go to her.*

Miss Emily stood there waiting for a response from the large dragoness.

*My dear Lady Emily, a silky voice filled her mind, of course you must go to her. She calls for you to come and begin you new lives together.*

She moved from the entrance and allowed Lady Emily to enter the grounds. Inside the chamber Emily could see many eggs about the floor of the chamber. She noticed the difference in the shapes and the colors. As she stepped forward a small child’s voice immediately called out to her.

*Are you there my friend. have you come for me at last?*

*Yes, yes, I am here my sweet.* Lady Emily looked about the chamber at all the eggs. *My goodness how am I ever to find you?*

*If you come forward and gently move your hand over the eggs she will tell you when she sees a shadow pass over her.* Lady Emily heard the Queen’s voice directing her. *But be very careful not to touch any of the other eggs Lady Emily.*

Emily moved about the eggs carefully trying each one, it was a very slow process. Then when she got to a light creamy green egg, she heard her little dragonet call out to her excitedly.

*I see a shadow above me! Is that you?*

*Yes my sweet, I have found you at last!* Lady Emily was smiling now. *What do I do now?*

*You must pick me up so we may bond as one.* The little dragon told her.

The Queen's large head nodded affirming what she had been told. James and Vail stood at the entrance and watched.

Lady Emily walked around the egg and found an opening. She used her cane to carefully roll her egg out into the opening away from the other eggs. She came forward and reached down and picked up the egg, at the same time saying, *here I am little one!* Immediately she received a large electric shock that plopped her on her bottom.

"Oh my!" she exclaimed.

Then she felt the little dragon in her mind, a warm feeling of pure love engulfed her. The expression on her face told James and Vail that she had made contact.

*I hope I didn't hurt you Lady Emily,* the little dragon told her immediately.

*Oh no my sweet, this is just delightful! My but you are a beautiful girl!*

Lady Emily and her dragonet were soon lost in conversation and oblivious to all around them. James knew they would be this way for several hours.

"Well, I think that went quite well." Turning he addressed Lady Valeria. *My Queen, your lovely child has captured the heart of Lady Emily. Thank you for aiding her in finding her dragonet.*

*James, rider of my mate, I am pleased to aid you in your quest. I shall stay and keep them company and will inform Valotin when they are finished.* The huge Queen then settled herself and began making a soothing purring sound.

*Thank you my Queen.*

James bowed and left the chamber. As they came back onto the plateau Elliott was waiting for them.

"How did it go? Did she make contact?" He was obviously very excited.

"It went very well. She found her dragon and they are now bonding. She will be a changed woman the next time you see her," James informed him.

"Ah yes, much younger and in better health. This is all so exciting, I must go and tell the others." He left the plateau at a fast pace and headed for the village.

James and Vail stood together on the plateau and looked out at the dragons flying above the sea.

"It has begun Vail, now we really have our work cut out for us."

"We're up to it James. We've had the best teachers in the world," Vail spoke with conviction, "we have all been prepared very well, and we all know what to do."

"I never doubted you Vail." James replied, "Now, let's go and inform the others."

A pair of yellow eyes followed them as they left the plateau. From his treetop perch he could watch the cave entrance. He was worried about his friend. She was rather elderly, although she refused to admit it. She had not come out with them; she was still in the large cave. Hours passed and she still had not emerged from the cave opening. He decided to take a chance and ask the large dragon who seemed to be in charge if she was all right. He knew it was a dangerous thing to do, but he had pledged his loyalty to the old woman. She was his one true friend; and he knew that she would do the same for him.

He waited till midnight, when he was sure that everyone else was gone; he flew to the plateau and lowered himself silently in front of Valotin. The large dragon raised his head slowly, and black intelligent eyes kept pace with the hawk-man's descent.

*What have you done with her mighty one? He raged in his mind. She is old and frail, she could do you no harm. An anguished pleading; where have you taken her?*

He stood his ground as Valotin shifted his weight and lowered his great head to him, looking him in the eye.

*Calm yourself my flying friend; we have done nothing to Lady Emily. She is still bonding with her dragon egg in the hatching chamber. She is perfectly fine, healthy and strong again.*

The birdman suddenly recognized the intelligence in Valotin's eyes and realized his error. He stuttered for a moment, *oh... healthy you say, bonding with her dragon egg. He spread his wings to leave, You swear this, she is safe?*

A great deep chuckle erupted from Valotin's throat; Essex kept silent pace with the conversation and an alert eye on the birdman. He would protect his leader with his life if needs be.

*You do not have to go young one. There are many here who would be your brothers if you would allow it. The birdman turned and faced Valotin, a puzzled look on his face. We are all different in one way or another. The world has changed my zealous friend, and there are new rules now. These few who have been saved have a great purpose, as you yourself have.*

*You do not find me repulsive? He spat out the words with great venom, a freak to gaze upon?*

Valotin could see his spirit was badly damaged.

*No, I do not; as a matter of fact I think you are a wonder to behold. Valotin held the birdman's. You have much grace in the air, and your friend loves you very much.*

Unprepared for the pure honesty, the birdman was taken off guard by Valotin's reply.

*I...you... you are not what I expected, he replied shaking his head back and forth. I apologize for my rudeness before; I did not know you were... he looked about the plateau in alarm. I must go... panic in his voice... must go quickly. He took to the air and then stopped and turned. If permitted, I should like to speak with you again. He took to the air and was soon gone from sight.*

Essex raised his head, *my liege he is in great torment deep in his soul. Will we be able to help him?*

*He has already taken his first step to redemption. He will return, for he knows he has a task to perform. Valotin raised his head and turned to Essex, thank you my friend for your concern and watchful eye.*

As the sky began to lighten, Valotin turned to face the rising sun. He greeted it as he always did, with prayers of thanks. As the first rays of the sun rose over the mountain and lit up his body he received the knowledge he would need for the coming day. He prayed for guidance and then prepared to greet his waking dragons with their instructions for the new day.

When he was sure that James had risen he called to him to come join him and told him of his midnight visitor. He told James that he believed that the flying one would return again after he saw that Lady Emily was indeed all right. He told him that he should speak to Lady Emily about him and find out about their special friendship when she is out from under the effects of 'first contact'.

Across the European continent, about 10 miles outside a small village in Siberia, a group of young men and women, teenagers actually, were hiding in a cave. It had a small opening that slanted downward and opened into a large cavern. They were well hidden from the several black beasts that had been scouring their area for the past several days.

“Hannah, have you dreamt of anything else?” asked Andre, the leader of this small group.

“Just that we must stay here, Andre; they will be coming for us very soon, perhaps days. And the leader of these dragons is called Valotin.” Hannah wondered why none of the others had the dreams as vivid as she. Why they did not know the names as she did.

Andre knew the group couldn’t last much longer in these caves; the monsters would surely find them soon. He had to get the rest of his group from the village to these caves; he couldn’t abandon them to the monsters. He had thought about leaving them to their fate, but his dreams had told him to protect them. And he knew enough not to disobey them.

“We will wait a time longer,” he looked at Hannah, “but you tell me when you get anything else, you hear!”

“Chill out Andre, I will tell you anything new I see.” Hannah pulled her coat around her and huddled next to her two large dogs. The cold was unforgiving.

Two days later Hannah told him she had another dream. He was to go and get the rest of the students now; he must not wait it must be now. Andre jumped at the chance and was able to retrieve the rest of his fellow students from the village; in all they numbered 30 now.



Lady Emily finally returned to her house and brought her dragon egg with her. She made a large nest in the garden behind her house and placed the egg in it. She described the jungle forest at the back of her house to her little dragonet, and she told her all about the different varieties of birds and butterflies that visited regularly. She explained how they were probably the last of their kind on earth. When her dragon asked what was touching her egg, Emily told her about the tiny hummingbirds flying about the egg. The dragon was very amused and told Lady Emily that she could 'feel' their little touches and was surprised at all the attention. Her little dragon then surprised Emily by asking when she would be able to meet the birdman. She said she felt him in Lady Emily's mind, and she looked forward to meeting her dear friend.

Four days later found James and Elizabeth on the pathway to Lady Emily's house. "Wait till you see the inside Elizabeth, it's amazing. The whole back wall of the house can be folded back into the wall giving her an unobstructed view of the jungle beyond. She has several small plateaus sloping downward and up again. It's really quite unusual and beautiful to see."

As they neared the entrance, the door opened and a tall lovely lady of about 50 years old stood there smiling at them. James could still see Emily in her face, and was amazed at how young she looked after only a few days time with her dragon egg.

"Lady Emily, how you have changed!" he greeted her with a slight hug and peek on the cheek.

"James, Elizabeth, how wonderful to see you! My sweet dragon told me just now that you were coming up the path," she explained. "Please come in, come in."

As they entered the house Elizabeth could hear birds singing just beyond the long hallway. They followed Emily and turned the corner - Elizabeth's eyes went wide in amazement.

"Oh how wonderful!" she exclaimed.

The whole backside was opened and she and James could see into the rain forest beyond. James noted the large nest that Emily had made for her egg. It was large enough to allow a human to lay in it and curl up about the egg.

"James, look at all the butterflies!" The upper branches of the trees were covered in colorful butterflies. As she spoke they took to the air in unison, "Oh, how beautiful!"

"Yes they are, aren't they? This was the only refuge they could find from the burning ones. They came here and refused to leave," replied Lady Emily to Elizabeth's wonder. "I have transplanted several varieties of flowers here for them." Jumping up she exclaimed, "Oh, forgive my manners; may I get you all something to drink?"

"Thank you, but no; we're just fine. I came to ask you some questions ..." began James.

"...about Adam," she said quickly. "Yes I know, my dragon told me you would be coming soon. What do you want to know?"

As she was speaking Emily went into house and over to a large bookcase that covered an entire wall. She withdrew several large pads, sketching pads James guessed.

She came back to them explaining, "I'm an avid bird watcher, and I often sketch what I see. With the burning around the world, this seems to be the only habitat where the different species could find safety. I have sketched them all over the years as they found this sanctuary. And then one day I ventured a little further than I normally go on my treks. Thru my binoculars I saw a sight that took my breath away; it was Adam." She handed them the sketchbooks. "If you look thru this one first," she said handing a large tome to Elizabeth, "you will see on page 86 what I saw the first time."

Elizabeth opened the large book and saw what Emily had lovingly sketched on the paper. It was a magnificent hawk in full flight. Upon closer inspection she could just make out the body of a man. It was obvious that Emily had been a long way off when she first saw 'Adam' flying. Elizabeth and James flipped thru the next several pages and saw the full picture of this unique human/avian hybrid. Emily had painstakingly captured the full measure of his unique physique and lovingly put it on paper. The feathers that covered most of his body were drawn with painstaking detail. His wings, in full suspension, gave him a rather masculine appearance. Or was that the way she had seen him? His face was done in softer hues, and his eyes were definitely bird-like.

As they flipped thru the sketch book Emily continued her story, "for the next six months I sketched him every chance I got. Of course Elliott had told us all about him when he first arrived, but I had never truly listened. I was always thinking of other things, so I paid no attention. That is until I first saw him. I spoke to Elliott, and he asked that I give him his privacy, allow him to live in peace." She came over to a large chair and sat down. Smiling, she leaned towards Elizabeth and whispered, "I sketched him in secret for about a year. I told no one about it, not even Elliott. Oh he would have been so angry with me," she chuckled remembering.

"Then one evening, I was right here admiring the days sketches," she said as she pointed about, "when he paid me a visit. I had my back to the jungle, the sun was setting and he glided in so quietly I never heard him. However, I saw his shadow cast on the wall in front of me as he landed. You couldn't possibly imagine how exciting it was for me."

"His voice was silky smooth, 'I rather like the last two, and the middle one best of all.' I heard him say as I turned around to face him. My heart was racing like a young schoolgirl's. I fell totally, hopelessly in love with him that day. Oh I know," she said raising her hand, "an old lady of 85, must be senile, eh? Oh don't feel embarrassed; I'm not ashamed to admit it. In fact, now that I am getting younger again, thanks to my sweet dragon, I have hope." James and Elizabeth smiled at each other.

"Where was I, oh yes - first meeting. He was very shy, but very kind also. He said he had been watching me for about three months or so. He wanted to meet me and find out why I sketched him over and over. Anyway to make a long story short, we became friends, dearest friends. I know," she said with a chuckle and a wave of her hand, "an old lady, hopelessly smitten and a very virile young hawk-man. My, my... it would make a great book!" she chuckled.

"He had no memory of his former life James, couldn't even remember his name. So I named him Adam, first of his kind. Over the years we have discussed many, many things and we have become close friends. And yes, he is aware of my feelings for him, but he doesn't take them seriously." She took a deep breath and then continued.

"And then the dreams began to come. Oh, we discussed them in detail, but he was never sure if they were good or evil. Through his past experiences you understand, he had become slow to trust anyone, let alone a dragon named Jake."

Lady Emily was silent for a time, when she continued Elizabeth could feel the pain in her voice, “I ... I haven’t seen him since I contacted my dragon egg. I don’t know where he could be. I hope he doesn’t think I have deserted him; what with my new status as a dragon rider.”

“Lady Emily, the Dragon Chronicles were taken from Elliott’s house two nights ago. They were returned this morning, in tact.” James was gentle in his relaying of this information.

She looked at James with wide eyes, “yes... yes?”

“Elliott believes that it was Adam; he’s trying to understand what’s happening. And something else you should know; when you made first contact with your egg, Adam faced Valotin and demanded he release you. Valotin explained what was happening to you. Your friend listened quietly and then told Valotin he had to ‘think about all this’.” James put his hand on Lady Emily’s shoulder, “I can only guess that he is trying to make sense of all this; and the fact that you are changing.”

“Thank you James, you give me hope. My sweet one said almost the same thing; she is very wise for one so young.” Lady Emily went to her dragon egg and stroked it lovingly, “you understand I am torn between the two of them. I can never leave my sweet companion, but I don’t want to lose Adam either. He must come to terms with all this on his own and understand that nothing has changed.”

James and Elizabeth left Lady Emily and returned to the plateau above. They heard the flapping of wings as they walked along. They knew it had to be Adam. James contacted Valotin and was told that he need not worry. Adam had come to him again and sought his council. He had accepted his destiny; Valotin told them, and the part he had to play.

That evening Emily was sitting in her chair on the back porch sketching her dragon egg when a familiar shadow cast itself across her. She looked up to see her friend lowering himself to the ground. His surprise in her appearance was plain to see. She rose quickly dropping her sketching pad and charcoal on the ground as she ran to him without thinking. For the first time they touched. Adam lovingly wrapped his wings around her for a moment as he pulled her to him - his first physical human contact in 8 years. Emily simply immersed herself in the moment relishing every bit of it. They would spend hours talking about the changes taking place in Emily, and the entire community. In the end he would decline meeting her dragon, as he was still unsure about everything.

Days later when Emily was in town for a training session, Adam descended to the plateau behind her house. He slowly walked around the nest. He noticed how the egg had grown larger. He began to talk to it in soft tones. He poured out his fears, his rage at his situation, and finally his acceptance of his fate. He explained that the only good to come of this whole nightmare was his friendship with Miss Emily. He admitted that he truly cared for her and feared losing her. He stood there before the little egg and curiously approached it. He spread his massive wings and lowered one, lightly brushing against the egg. He jumped back quickly when he heard/felt in his mind childlike laughter. He waited for a moment trying to understand. He stepped forward again and repeated the process.

*It tickles!* He heard in his mind, and again laughter.

*I... I hear you!* He thought in his mind. *How can this be!*

*Why can it not? A small childlike voice asked him. There is nothing the Creator cannot do. If He wishes us to communicate, than we shall! We both love Lady Emily; perhaps this is what unites us. I am not your enemy Adam I should like to be your friend. I can feel your sadness and it makes me sad too!*

*You feel what I feel? Adam was beginning to understand how deeply the bond between dragon and human was but he still did not understand how it could include him. I thought that you only connected with your rider. How can I be included, I am only her friend.*

*Adam, you are more than her friend, the little voice said. I can feel her spirit when she speaks or thinks of you. She loves you with a love that transcends to a higher level. You yourself feel it when you are with her. I can feel the same thing within your spirit even now as we speak of her.*

*There can be no future for us ... you forget little one - I am a freak! He answered angrily; others would always look on me as an abomination! Adam sank to his knees in despair.*

*What others? No one here thinks of you as that. The small childlike voice sighed and continued, don't you know... You are what you perceive yourself to be, Adam.*

*Adam looked at the egg, what do you...*

*The little dragon sighed again. You must think of yourself as something more. For you are something more...something very special! The little dragon spoke with great conviction. Do you really think that the Creator would allow you life if he didn't approve of your being? I believe that He has special plans for you.*

*Their conversation lasted all afternoon, and in the end Adam agreed with the knowledgeable little dragon. He must be the one who changes his perception of himself. They formed a bond as friends that day. As the afternoon wore on the little dragon spoke of many things that put Adam's mind at ease. He began to have hope in his heart once more and he looked forward to telling Emily of their bonding. With this little dragon's help, Adam had finally put the rage aside.*

Things began to move along quite quickly. Cedric was called to the hatching grounds and nearly broke his leg hurrying up the hill. He had studied all the required etiquette with the Queen, and was prepared when he walked into the chamber. Unfortunately, upon seeing her up close; and hearing his egg call to him enthusiastically, he promptly forgot everything. The Queen chuckled knowingly, and helped him along and soon he was united with his dragon egg.

Dee and Lee Chin received their call at the same time. They made their way to the plateau together, and Lee Chin went knowingly to Valotin to ask for advice. He directed them both to the hatching grounds and his Queen. They found their eggs beside each other. They learned from their new friends that they were very excited that they would soon be re-united once again. This proved to Lee Chin that what he had begun to think was perhaps true. These dragons had been here before! Dee's face was aglow with joy as she made contact with her dragon. And Lee Chin was soon lost to serene ecstasy as he and his egg shared their first contact.

The Shaman showed up one day with two children, a boy and a girl, and sought an audience with Ichor. Bowing low in respect, he explained that both children claimed that dragon children were calling them to the plateau. Their names were Xatan and Azita; good children from good homes. He had consulted with the stars and believed that only the dragons could help him. Ichor told him the dragons had need of these two. They were to become great warriors and riders of dragons. They would ride into battle with him against the evil ones. The small Shaman accepted this without question and considered it a great honor for his village. When he returned to his village he told his people of the honor that their village had been blessed with. He ordered two small statues of the children be cast and placed them on the altar stone next to the large carving of Ichor/Quetzal.

Elliott finally received his 'call' and hurried to the plateau. He went through the same ritual as the others, upon his emergence from the hatching grounds several hours later he cried like a baby. He was filled with such joy that he couldn't speak. It was then that the others understood at last what they would all be experiencing. The reality of the situation finally hit them all and each waited with growing anticipation for their turn to be called.

Two weeks later James and Vail paid a visit to Elliott. They told him it was time to pick up the students at the school at the top. The students had all been prepared thru their dreams and they would be waiting for them. Both men noticed that Elliott had changed a great deal. He had been undergoing the de-aging process and was fit and trim once again. His hair was fuller and thicker, the white changed to a dark grayish color. His appearance was that of a man in his early fifties. Elliott told them how well he felt, both bodily and spiritually. How he had regained his eyesight and his agile mobility again. Elliott told them he also had news from their contacts.

"Three of our contacts have reported several of their people saying that they were hearing a child calling for them. I can give you their locations." He proceeded to lay a large world map on the table and showed James where the hidden locations were. He also detailed where other locations were located around the world.

"Excellent Elliott, we really begin in earnest now." James told him.

"I thought we had already begun," Elliott said baffled.

"Valotin has been waiting for this. We'll send Reggie and Cynthia to Iceland; and Terry and Sean to Spain for the others; Theo and Susanna will retrieve the ones in Africa. We will pick them all up in two days. Please inform them to be ready."

**“I’ll send the messages myself when we return from this trip.” Elliott was obviously enjoying being in ‘the game’ once again. They began to walk towards the plateau above.**

**“There is also a large school in Russia that is almost ready. But there are many students and it will take all of us to go and get them. We must prepare quarters for the many people to soon join us. Ichor will take his students to the temple at Machu Picchu. There he will train his army.” James explained that in splitting up the teams they would gain the time needed to train the riders. We will have four months to make fighters out of them; it should be more than enough time.”**

**Valotin and Essex were waiting for them on the plateau when they arrived. They mounted and were soon airborne. Elliott directed them to a high peak between two giant mountains. As they approached they could see that the school had suffered damage from the burning devils as they had passed thru the area. The main building had been destroyed, but several of the other buildings appeared not to have been damaged at all.**

**“Look below,” shouted James to Elliott. As he looked down to the school, Elliott could see 10 boys waving and shouting at them in the courtyard of the school. The dragons landed and James and Elliott climbed down. Vail hopped off of Essex and waited by his side.**

**A little hesitant at first, the young men came forward. “Greetings to you all,” James bellowed in a loud voice. “Your dreams prepared you and told you of our coming. We don’t have much time, are you ready to come with us?”**

**There were loud shouts of “Yes...yes! We’re ready!” The former students rushed forward surrounding James. There were introductions all around and then James explained the need for permission before Valotin could address them. They gladly gave it and were soon mesmerized by the voice of the mighty beast.**

**Two days later the same scene was enacted in the Icelandic mountains of that frozen land, and also in the rolling hills of Spain. In total 30 riders were brought back to Peru. All had been schooled in their dreams of what to expect, and what they were fighting for. There was fierce determination in the faces of all these men and women. Within days they were all in contact with their dragons-to be and on the pathway to becoming Riders of Light for the deliverance of the world.**

**A week later it was time to go to Russia and pick up the students in Siberia. This would be a very dangerous trip. Valotin assembled his riders and dragons on the plateau early in the morning. Valotin informed the riders that at least 10 of the black devils still roamed that area of the world.**

**All boasted that they would destroy them easily.**

***Warriors it is good that you boast, but hear me well. We will have to leave no trail for them to follow. This means that we will have to destroy them all before we can pick up the last of the riders we need for the coming battle. They must all be destroyed,*** he explained to his dragons and riders alike. **They understood what was at stake and vowed to destroy all of them and leave no sign of their ever being there.**

**As the sun rose, Elliott, Dee, and Lee Chin climbed the plateau to see them off. Their appearance had rapidly changed over the several weeks since their contact with their dragon eggs. Each was tall and strong again, regaining their youthful bodies. James was aware that Dee and Lee Chin had finally openly revealed the extent of their relationship.**

**The riders were all very keyed up about the trip. “I wish I could be there as an observer,” Elliott told James excitedly, “I would really like to see the dragons in action!”**

**All three turned at the sound of the riders approaching the plateau. The three former spies saw that the riders were dressed in their leather fighting uniforms with their crossbows slung across their backs. They were silent as they went about their tasks and mounted their dragons. They looked to Valotin for his signal. At a nod of the mighty beast’s head they took off as one, soon lost to sight as they made for the thermals.**

**“What a sight!” Elliott blurted out, “May God protect them.”**

On the other side of the world, three large tattered dragons soared over the cold mountainous region of lower Siberia. They were hungry, and looking for prey. It was getting more and more difficult to find the hiding people. Growling stomachs forced them to seek out their quarry in daylight hours. Their shadows played across the many caves where people huddled in fear. Below, in a large cave, frightened faces watched the circling monsters.

“The dreams said they would be coming today. How can they if these beasts are still roaming about like this?” Anastasia asked.

She was worried that they wouldn’t be able to get away after so long a fight to survive. The dreams had given them all hope. With each succeeding dream this hope grew. Now at last they knew the riders were coming for them. As if knowing, the three beasts had showed up at dawn and showed no signs of leaving.

Their leader was young man in his late twenties. Over the years he had seen it all; the burning attacks, the deaths, constant running and hiding. Finding the caves was by sheer chance. But finding a way to exist in an upside down world was much harder. He had rescued each and every one of them and kept them all alive through his sheer will. In all there were now forty of them, barely existing. He was livid that the filthy beasts had decided to show up at just this point in time.

“We have no way to warn them; damn it,” he yelled in frustration. He paced back and forth for a few minutes deep in thought.

“Wait, maybe if we all concentrate on the same thing we would be able to get a message thru to them. Everyone, come closer, form a circle. Now I want all of you to think the same thing. See in your mind’s eye a picture of the black devils circling above us. Set it in your mind clearly. Now all join hands and concentrate; concentrate as hard as you can.”

Holding hands, the large group closed their eyes and each began to think of what was outside their cave.

High above, as the thermals raced around the planet, 14 very large dragons were riding the waves in fierce determination. Anticipating the coming fight, each was itching to try out their new fighting style; it wouldn’t be a long wait. They were approaching their jumping off location and each prepared for the dangerous jump out of the thermal.

*James, our young charges are sending a warning. It seems they are trapped by three of the filthy beasts. Shall we pay them a visit my friend?* Valotin chuckled and he dove from the thermals.

*You are enjoying this aren’t you?* James yelled as Valotin dove out of the thermal and began his spiral downward. *Yes, my large friend, ha-ha... let’s go kick some dragon ass!*

Loud screeches from outside broke the concentration of the small group. Andre made his way to the entrance with Anastasia right behind him. They held their breath at the sight that greeted them. Three very large dragons were diving on the black devils. They were shooting flames and driving the vicious monsters into the ground.



**“YES,”** shouted Andre leaping into the air. **“My God did you see that?”** He grabbed Anastasia by the shoulders, **“Boom! They were gone, just like that,”** he said as he swung his arm widely around, eyes wide with excitement.

A young teenager beckoned him back to the entrance again. One of the large dragons landed, a deep dark green, unbelievably huge. They all watched in amazement as Vail dismounted and ran towards them. They backed up to allow him room to enter.

Vail ran into the cave, **“Hello, hello; do you all speak English?”**

Andre stepped forward, **“we do, sir. It was our second language in school.”**

**“Good, it will make this much easier, listen carefully.”** He said speaking rapidly, **“there are ten dragons roaming in this area. We just knocked out three of them; the others will be coming quickly to see what the row was all about. Stay here in the cave till we get rid of them.”** At that he saw the sudden look of fear on the faces of the young men and women.

**“We will come back for you! We are not leaving here without you, got that?”** He told them sternly as they all nodded in affirmation. **“Now stay under cover!”** Vail suddenly turned towards the dragon on the ground, as if listening, **“Woops, got to go; we’re about to have company.”**

*They come, Essex called to him, hurry my friend!*

Vail ran out of the cave and climbed onto Essex and they took off at lightening speed, lost to sight in seconds.

The young people huddled about the entrance of the cave and looked above. There was no wind, no movement, nothing. They looked and waited, minutes ticked by, it was deathly silent. Suddenly the sky erupted with black dragons. They were screeching and hissing, diving at frightening speeds. The biggest dragons the small ragtag group had ever seen were chasing them! They were flaming the dragons and driving them into the ground. Far above they could see one huge dragon hovering. He seemed to be directing the others. With a loud thud one dragon fell not 20 feet from the cave entrance and the young people watched as it was flamed into ash by a large scarlet colored dragon. What took all of them by surprise was that a woman rode this dragon! The scarlet dragon hovered bare seconds and then took off and went after another one.

The former students watched the battle for the next 15 minutes. Each dragon was singled out and flamed into the ground... nothing remained of it but ash. At the end of the skirmish adrenaline was flowing freely, the students were all panting, as though they had been in the battle themselves. They could scarcely believe what they had just witnessed. For the first time in so many years they had hope for the future.

**“Whoa, did you see that? They took them out so quickly. I can hardly wait till I get a chance to do that myself!”** Andre spoke what they were all thinking.

The young people watched as the dragons landed one at a time and their riders dismounted. As they ran towards the cave they were all shouting and congratulating each other on the battle. The students were surprised to see that there were an equal number of male and female riders. They were all very fierce in their appearance, but seemed to soften, as they got closer to the cave. Up above two dark forest green dragons remained in the sky and scouted the surrounding area. The huge chocolate brown dragon that they assumed was the leader landed in the midst of the other dragons.

The rider climbed down and immediately the other riders opened a pathway for him. He was obviously their leader. After a few moments he made his way up the slope to the cave entrance. James entered the cave and met eye to eye with these young people. Their clothes were in bad shape, but they had a determination about them...they were fighters!

“Are you all ready to leave this place?” James asked them in a booming voice.

“YES!” they all shouted gathering around James.

Andre stepped up to James and extended his hand introducing himself.

“I am Andre, we have dreamt about you for so long. To meet you here and now is a great honor.” He shook James’ hand up and down excitedly. He introduced all the students by name and then said, “We are all ready to go with you, but please, we have one question?”

“Can you bring your animals with you? Correct?” Elizabeth said softly.

“Yes...yes! We have several dogs; they have always warned us when the monsters were in the area. We would not want to abandon them now.” Andre looked to James for an answer.

“We have dogs also Andre,” James explained, “the dragons like animals, they enjoy talking to them. Do not worry about the safety of your furry friends. Now, bring them out so we may meet them.”

Andre called for one of his group and a young woman stepped forward. Her head was swathed in a cowl hiding her face completely.

“I’m Hannah,” she said as she whistled a shrill high-pitched tone. “Boris, Ivan...come!” Two large Siberian huskies came bounding out of the back of the cave along with one small skinny little puppy. Picking up the puppy she turned to Elizabeth. “I found him not three days ago. I will not leave him here to die,” she said defiantly.

Elizabeth went to her, “you don’t have to leave him Hannah. All animals are welcome at Dragon’s Bay. The dragons enjoy the company of our animals. Your pets will be greatly appreciated and taken care of with lots of love from the dragons.” She tried to put the girl at ease.

James gathered all the young men and women about him “listen carefully please, in order for us to move quickly, you will be broken up into several groups and placed in the care of our riders. They will instruct you as to mounting the dragons. Listen to their instructions and follow them to the letter. We wouldn’t want you fall off now, would we?” he chuckled. “Come now; we must leave this place and take you to your new home.”

“Hannah,” said Elizabeth softly, “do you see that creamy bluish-gray dragon over there? The one with a strange attachment on her neck?” she pointed to Lady Drucilla.

“Yes, yes I see her.” She answered unsure of what Elizabeth was going to say.

“She has a traveling device about her neck. It is how we carry our dogs when we go long distances.” Terry came forward and stood by Elizabeth, “this is Terry, and Lady Drucilla is his companion dragon. Take your dogs and follow him, he will tell you what to do. Hannah,” Elizabeth said reaching for her hand and squeezing it, “it’s going to be all right. Lady Drucilla will tell your friends what to do. Trust in the dragons Hannah, they will not let you down.”

Hannah followed Terry down the hill and over to his dragon. She was overwhelmed by the sheer size of Lady Drucilla. She watched as the large dogs went to the big dragon and sat as she lowered her head to them. They looked up at her and turned their heads several times as tho' they were listening to her. Then she lowered herself to the ground and the dogs jumped onto the strange seats on each side of her. Terry strapped them in and they sat perfectly still waiting for the dragon to take off.

Terry took Hannah's hand and brought her before Lady Drucilla. Bowing as instructed, she asked for a ride for herself and her animals.

*I am pleased to offer a ride to so caring a woman. Your dogs speak very highly of you, Hannah. They have much love for you.*

As she listened to Lady Drucilla, a single tear cascaded down her hidden face. In her mind she thought, *thank-you, thank-you so much. They are my dearest friends.*

Terry took her hand and led her to the dragon's side. There he explained how to mount and she was soon sitting on the huge beast just behind Terry. She had placed the little puppy inside her jacket and zipped him up, but he poked his head out to keep watch on his friends. Terry looked at the skinny little puppy, reached over and scratched his head and laughed.

"You know he's a wolf cub, don't you?" He asked a startled Hannah.

The riders led the rest of the students, broken into small groups, out of the cave one group at a time. They were instructed to bow to their dragon and ask for a ride. Their faces lit up as they were greeted by the dragon and told to mount. The whole process took less than 30 minutes. They were all soon airborne and heading back to the coast of South America. The future riders were all experiencing the new joy of flying on a dragon.

Descending from the thermals in a downward spiral less than an hour later, the new band of riders-to-be looked below at their new home. There were great smiles, and faces in awe. It was much warmer here, many noted, more inviting than the frozen wasteland that had been their home. They could see the rich lush jungle below them and the coastal town they would soon call home. There was a flurry of activity on the large plateau. There were many people working on thatched huts, and there appeared to be some dogs running among them. Hannah could hear Boris and Ivan barking excitedly; they had also seen the dogs. The large group landed two at a time discharging their riders and taking off quickly so the others could land.

As Lady Drucilla landed the two wolfhounds ran over to greet them. A quick bellow from Lady Drucilla stopped them in their tracks. They sat and waited until Terry un-strapped the huskies from their seats. Boris and Ivan jumped down and ran to the front of the dragon barking their thanks. Greetings and sniffs were shared with the wolfhounds and they were all soon off into the jungle. The little puppy snuggled up closer to Hannah apparently not too sure about all the large dragons landing on the plateau.

The new riders stood together waiting for all their friends to land and dismount. The last to land was Ichor, and as the new riders all dismounted he took to the air. Sarah came over to the group and asked to speak to the leader. Andre stepped forward and bowed low; she beckoned him to follow her. She took him to where James and Peter were waiting for them.

"Andre, I am James, this is Peter," he said as Peter extended his hand, "and you already have meet Lady Sarah. We ride the lead dragons, Valotin, Alakar, and Ichor," he said pointing them out. "Over there are four new huts that have been built by the natives. They labored very hard and thru the last two days and nights to get them ready for you and your people. They are very large and will house ten of you in each hut."

Peter picked it up here, "We would like your group to divide themselves up into four groups of ten. Have your people pick their huts and set their belongings in them. When you are finished, we will go below to the town. The residents have prepared a feast in your honor. You and your people need to rest and replenish your bodies. You have been through a lot and deserve no less."

"We..., we are very grateful to you all. The dreams prepared us for all this, but to see it actually happen...you understand... it is too much!" Andre was obviously overwhelmed by all that had happened in so short a time.

"Would you like to meet Valotin and express to him your gratitude?" James asked him.

"Oh yes ...yes indeed! I have spoken to him in my dreams so many times. He kept us going with hope. Yes, yes!"

Andre's eyes were wide in awe as he looked up at Valotin. James explained all about dragon protocol and Andre was soon lost in conversation with Valotin. His friends all watched wide-eyed as his face lit up and began to shine with a glow of pure joy. When they were finished speaking, James led him back to his friends.

As they went below with the large group, James made his way to Nigel to ask for a favor. "There is a girl among them, Hannah; she wears a covering over her face. I would like you to take a look at her. I believe she was burned by one of the monsters. See if you can help her in any way. Valotin says that she has a very special task, perhaps we can help her."

"No problem James," Nigel was the soul of discretion and would know how to approach her. "I shall be very discreet so as not to cause her any embarrassment."

The little town had gone all out in preparing for the arrival of these weary young men and women. They had all been informed how long and hard they had fought to stay alive. Lady Mai and Terry planned a feast to celebrate their liberation and arrival. A menu had been prepared and all the ingredients had been gathered in advance. Lady Mai had started the preparations and Terry had joined her upon his return. Their friendship had blossomed in the last few months and deepened, much to the enjoyment of Lady Mai.

As they reached the end of the path and turned the corner towards the small town, James was amazed at the sight before him. Lady Emily had performed an engineering miracle by enlarging the town café to make it two levels - one overlooking the other. She and Adam had worked on the project together. He had flown to the top of the rain forest and collected many beautiful flowers. Huge hanging baskets of orchids and several hibiscus hybrids were placed about the café.

The fragrant aroma of the flowers filled the air. A large opening in the roof allowed the sun to shine in on this colorful display. All in all a very friendly atmosphere abounded. Large tables were placed all around the room. As they entered, six students at a time were taken by the seasoned riders and residents to one of the tables. Breaking the students up into small groups would allow for the free flow of information. Later, when they returned to their huts, they would all share what they had learned; which was exactly the point.

Nigel saw to it that Hannah was at his table along with Lady Emily. As everyone was seated there was a sudden hush over the entire area. All heard the unmistakable sound of flapping wings approaching. Lady Emily's heart was racing as fast as a hummingbird's... she recognized that sound.

Descending in the center of the room thru the opening was Adam, in absolute splendor. His feathers had taken on an iridescent blue-green color and he seemed to glow in the sunlight. For a moment the entire scene was etched in Emily's mind, to be drawn later in rich colors. Eyes wide, the students all looked on in amazement as Adam landed and folded his wings behind him.

Suddenly the room erupted in clapping and shouts of "Yes!" and "Good show!" "All right!" "Welcome Adam!"

Adam spotted Lady Emily and headed towards her. Bowing slightly, he took her hand and asked, "May I join you Lady Emily," in a soft silky voice. Grinning from ear to ear, Emily nodded and Adam sat beside her.

James called them to order and a prayer of thanksgiving was said. Afterwards, the happy natives brought out huge platters of food. To have the "hawk-man" here was a sign of great honor. They began to hum, and then raised their voices in a joyous tune. Pretty soon everyone was in a good mood and there was a great deal of laughter about the room.

*My love, you have outdone yourself.* Elizabeth told James. *Adam is healing quickly.*

*I fear it wasn't me my sweet,* he quickly answered her; *I would say that Valotin has been busy!*

*Indeed my friends! Someone has been very busy,* Valotin interjected, *and I believe we all know who!*

Both James and Elizabeth answered at the same time, **JAKE!**

*Yes my friends, he still keeps pace with us. Now enjoy your meal and have some fun.*

With that the connection was broken; Elizabeth and James grinned at each other in the knowing.

The afternoon gathering was a great success. New friendships were forged, and a feeling of camaraderie filled the room. Each table was aglow as the riders, riders-to-be, and the new students were all sharing their experiences. Each group found new friends, and a better understanding of all that had happened to them.

Adam and Emily chatted with Nigel. Adam even engaged in a conversation with Hannah, who was spellbound by the vision before her. For a time she forgot all about her own appearance, she was even animated in her conversations with him. At one point her scarf slipped and Adam got a brief glimpse of her face. Not reacting at all, he continued his conversation. He explained to her how he came to this little community. How his friendship with the dragons had changed him.

"It is all in how you perceive yourself," he told her. These words would stay with her all night.

"But you are so beautiful," she told him. "How could anyone think anything different?"

Her statement took Adam aback; he knew she had spoken from her heart. Her words made him look even deeper into himself. "As I said, it is all in how you perceive yourself. Believing in oneself changes the world about you; and in so doing, you change."

*Perhaps there is hope for me here,* Hannah thought to herself. *Perhaps I am not the monster I think I am.*

**Nigel engaged Hannah in a conversation and told her about the Dragon Chronicles and the amazing changes in people both physically and spiritually. He even managed to get a promise from Hannah to stop by his clinic the next day. Conversations were going on about the room at a feverish pace. Information was taken in on several levels, to be disseminated later. The gathering was a resounding success.**

**Several hours later James called them all to order.**

**“Our dragons have found a warehouse distribution center near Rio de Janeiro. It looks to be undisturbed. You can all use a change of clothes, and other things.”**

**There was a lot of clapping.**

**“We will go there tomorrow morning to scout it out. If it proves to be worthy, you will be taken there in small groups to replenish your wardrobes.”**

**Great shouts went up from everyone. James called them all back to order.**

**“Now let us make our way up the plateau to your new homes; riders, away with you!”**

**The young men and women rose and slowly made their way out of the café and followed the seasoned riders up the pathway.**

**James and Elizabeth came over to Emily and Adam. James extended his hand as he walked right up to Adam.**

**“I am pleased that you could join us Adam. I have wanted to meet you for a very long time.”**

**Hesitantly, Adam took his hand and shook it. James was surprised at the silky feel of the birdman’s hand.**

**“I was surprised at the warm welcome. It was a very pleasant surprise,” Adam said smiling at Elizabeth.**

**“We have all been waiting for you to join us Adam, but we didn’t want to push you. Forgive me for starrng, but you are so beautiful,” Elizabeth blurted out.**

**Quickly realizing her mistake Elizabeth turned a bright red.**

**“I can’t help it, when you flew in, it was so magnificent; your wings actually glowed in the sunlight.”**

**Adam was taken by her candor.**

**“I am finding that I need not hide away from people. I’m learning that things have indeed changed in the world. I like the changes,” he looked at Emily now, “some more than others.”**

The next morning after breakfast, the students were gathered together by James and Elizabeth and separated into two groups; males and females. James went off with the men and Elizabeth took the women to the waterfall area, near a secluded pool. She instructed them to disrobe and dive in and watched them carefully as they swam about for a time; scanning and learning. She was not alone in this, as they too watched her pacing back and forth around the pool. They knew this was not just fun; a feel of 'expectancy' was in the air. Elizabeth picked up her backpack and removed a large book. She smiled and held it to her bosom lovingly.

"Sisters!" she began calling them to attention. "I call you that because that is what we are; sisters." She looked about at all the young women; now that she had their attention she continued quickly, "Do you know why you are all here? Do you know what brought you all to this point?" Some murmurings were heard, but nothing concrete; and then a clear voice broke thru the garbled voices.

"We've all been chosen," Hannah's voice was clear as a bell, the inflection carried with it a tone of belief and conviction. "We aren't alive because of dumb luck," she looked about at her sisters, "or our non-existent survival skills. We're all alive and here because we've all been chosen. Chosen to do something," she continued, shaking her head back and forth, as if trying to get a fix on an elusive thought just out of reach, "something that will end this madness once and for all."

"Very good Hannah and right you are." Elizabeth smiled and looked at them, (*yes they were ready*). "Ladies, I hold in my hand a copy of the Dragon Chronicles," she held it up high so they could all see it. "I suggest you gather in groups and read it to each other. It contains the answers to many of your questions, and it also explains what happened and why."

The women all came over to Elizabeth and took the book.

"The dragons have been here before; ages ago it was decided that man would go his way alone. I'd say we didn't do to well."

There was some small chatter amongst them and many saying 'I knew it!' Elizabeth gave them some time; she hoped that James was doing as well with the boys.

She cleared her throat and gained their attention again. "I want all of you to look at me," Elizabeth began to undress and then walk slowly around the pool. "How old do you think I am?"

The young women stared at Elizabeth and began shouting out...

"25!"...

"No more than 27"...

"Maybe 30 at the very most"...

She turned around once more and said softly, "In real time I would have been 56 this year." She waited as there was stunned silence for a moment and then they erupted with a burst of questions all at the same time. Elizabeth held out her arms and quieted them.

"It's the dragons!" Hannah's voice rang out with excitement, "the dragons do this somehow, when they hatch...?" She looked to Elizabeth for confirmation.

"Yes Hannah, you are correct again." She redressed and stood before all the young girls.

"Up above," she said pointing "is Ichor, Second of the Ancients to return, the Hammer of Fire. You and your dragons will be of his Clan; your leader is Lady Sarah."

With those words said, Sarah dove from above into the pool startling the young women. She surfaced in the center of them calling them to gather around. She looked at each girl and imprinted her face in her mind, for Ichor. She stayed a bit longer staring at Hannah. After a bit she climbed out onto the bank and beckoned them all to gather around. She began to speak to them in a soft mesmerizing tone.

“You are all about to enter the world of dragon riders. You have all received the dreams; you all accepted them or you wouldn’t be here. When you bond with your dragon egg much will be revealed to you; and many of your questions and wonderings will be answered. Ichor’s children are strong and fierce; you will make good fighters and riders. Remember my sisters; you were each chosen for this task by a power greater than all of us. Do not doubt yourselves or your abilities.”

Sarah now stood, “now we must observe some dragon etiquette. In order for Ichor to speak to you he must have your permission. It is done thru telepathy; he enters your mind, so you see you must agree first. It would be unthinkable for a dragon to do so without permission; it is not in their nature.” She looked at all the young eager faces and asked, “Do you all give permission for Ichor to speak to you. Answer in you mind with a ‘yes’.”

*They have all answered yes my lady. Greetings young warriors!*

There were many inward takes of breath and “ahs!” Ichor soon had them all spellbound as he explained what he expected of each of them. By the time he was finished they were all eager to meet his children and begin the process.



As the weeks went by Ichor's children called the students from Siberia one at a time. They made their way up the plateau to the hatching grounds and found their lives changed forever. They were all well suited for Sarah and Jackson's training. As her second in command, Jason kept them busy learning the proper use of the crossbow. He vowed they would first be deadly shots on the ground before they ever got into the air. Once their dragons hatched, they would begin intense practice in the air.

Hannah's life changed completely when she made contact with her dragon egg. She was finally free of the self-loathing that had engulfed her. She learned quickly from her dragon and progressed at a rapid rate. Following the Dragon Chronicles tale, she introduced her dogs to her new life long partner. Ichor was not surprised that she embraced the teachings so whole-heartedly. He knew what task lay ahead of her, and he was sure that she would complete it successfully. Her huskies made it their personal business to keep the young dragon egg company whenever she was away. The small puppy began to grow and proved that Terry was correct; he was indeed a full-blooded wolf. He filled out and grew into a large animal; his thick gray/ white fur made him appear larger than the huskies. Hannah named him Thor.

Steve, at Valotin's request, had come for a visit and brought with him the riding harnesses he had invented. He sought out Lady Emily and explained how he constructed them; she caught on quickly offering some new ideas. They both worked on making about sixty more; they would need at least that many for the coming battle. Four days and sleepless nights later they were ready. Vail and Essex offered to try out one of them. After a bit of adjusting, he reported that it worked great.

Steve's visit broke up the tough training regimen that had been going on for weeks. He also brought news from Jake for Valotin, and letters from Daniel and Kate. He was very impressed with Dragon's Bay, and could hardly believe the size of the fighting force that Valotin and James were preparing. He was totally fascinated by the birdman, and after introductions, made an instant friend of Adam. They spent a great deal of time together, and Steve told him all about the talking dragons, and Diana – the woman who thought she was a dragon. Adam was very intrigued and said when this was all over he would really like to meet them. But more important, he wanted to meet Jake.

Master Jeffery was brought over for a special training session for the new riders. He was thrilled to come but only so he could pick everyone's mind for information for his Chronicles. He was kept quite busy for several weeks pursuing this. He schooled all the new riders on dragon lore, and stressed the importance of proper etiquette that was to be followed. He answered many questions that the new riders-to-be had with his lectures. And in the evenings he regaled them all with the tales of the First, and the great battle they fought at Dragon's Hill.

The day finally came when Valotin and James ordered all the eggs to be brought to the hatching chambers. They were all quite large now and Valotin knew the riders would be unable to carry them to the cave if they waited any longer. He also knew that they would begin to grow at an accelerated pace now. They needed to be in the chamber for the final stage.

Several weeks later Ichor took his riders and their eggs up to Machu Picchu. He dared not delay any longer as the eggs were also growing at an alarming rate. They would return as riders in several months. Alakar did the same with his riders. Now was a time of waiting for the dragons to hatch.

One bright sunny morning Emily awoke with an air of great expectancy. As she lay there in her bed, she could hear the birds outside singing and chattering in very excited tones. She got up and wrapped her robe about her and went to see what had gotten them so worked up. The large trees in her backyard were covered in birds of every possible description. It seemed that every branch was filled. There were thousands of butterflies flitting about. Adam was sitting there amongst them with a silly smile on his face.

“What’s going on, Adam?” She asked as she stepped out on to the back deck.

He had never seen her so beautiful. She had changed so quickly these last few weeks that he could hardly catch his breath each time he saw her. He stood up and slowly glided over to her. Ever so tenderly, he caressed the side of her face with the backside of his hand.

“I want you to know something,” he began, “No matter what happens, I want you to know that I care for you like I have never cared for anyone; I love you Emily.”

“Oh Adam,” she said breathlessly, “I have loved you for so long.” She raised her arms and slid them around his shoulders and pulled him to her. Running her fingers thru his feathers she said softly, “this doesn’t bother me, it is you who I love.” Adam could feel her touch burning thru his body.

Suddenly all the butterflies and birds took to the air in unison.

Eyes wide, Emily pushed herself away and exclaimed, “Oh my, she calls for me Adam! She’s hatching! I... I have to go.”

Their eyes locked for a moment, and then Adam smiled. She ran to her room and grabbed some clothes put them on and ran out of the house. As she headed up towards the plateau Adam took to the air, following her.

She reached the top and saw James and Valotin standing there. Her face beaming, they understood what was happening and quickly moved out of her way as she ran into the hatching grounds. Adam landed and went over to them.

“So this is it then,” they could hear the fear in his voice as he spoke. He looked to them both for support.

*Fear not my winged brother, she goes to her destiny. When she emerges she shall be yours again.* Valotin told him.

The three of them waited on the plateau, soon joined by others as word spread that Lady Emily’s dragon was hatching.

James left them and prepared a spot to receive her when she emerged from the cave. He called Elizabeth to his side so they could both welcome her as a Rider of Light. He knew what she would be going thru and how her body would be changed. Elizabeth pointed out that she would want to return home to rest and build her strength again.

Lady Emily entered the hatching grounds and saw large pieces of egg shell lying about the outer chamber. She waited a moment for her eyes to adjust to the darkness of the cave. She looked about frantically trying to see her dragon.

A soft silky voice called out to her. *My sweet Lady Emily, come here my friend, and let us meet face to face. I have waited for this moment for so long.*

Emily took a step forward and turned to her right. Her eyes went wide in amazement at the sight before her. There stood a giant of a dragon, creamy deep green, like her rain forest. Her body was glistening in the light that penetrated the hatching chamber. She was at least 28 feet with huge muscled limbs; she had a golden stripe down her back, and gold markings on her face. Emily had never seen anything so beautiful in her life.

*Oh my God, you are so beautiful!* Emily thought in her mind.

*Of course I am! I could be nothing less for my beautiful friend.* The dragon took a step forward and raised herself up to her full height; spreading her wings she came forward and laid her head down at Emily's feet.

*I am the Lady Arian, warrior dragon to Valotin, Fourth of the Ancients. You are my friend, my companion, my Rider! I was chosen especially for you, and you were chosen for me. We are to be warriors who will free this world of the black menace.*

She lifted her head to just in front of Emily and locked eyes with her. A bright beam of light shot out of her and made contact with Emily. Information began to flow as Emily felt herself rising in the air; she was way to excited to be concerned. As the information flowed, Emily began to see in her minds eye many things. The encampment, people she knew, people she would meet, strategy in battle, and then there was Adam. Suddenly his feathers fell away to reveal the man he truly was.

*Behold he who loves you!*

Emily saw Adam as he truly was and was overcome; she could actually feel his arms around her. A bellow from Lady Arian brought her back to reality. She began to turn slowly in a soft green light. The great dragon encircled Emily with her wings as she turned. She could feel a charge of electricity coursing thru her body. She felt the change in the color of the light as a blue went throughout her body healing and cleansing every part of her. All the while this was going on she was still receiving enormous amounts of information. She saw where the devils were sleeping; she saw many of the battles they would fight; and she saw the ultimate victory and it filled her with great joy. She slowly stopped turning and her dragon placed her on the ground.

*You have done very well my beautiful companion. I must be off to present myself to Valotin and his Queen. Then I will go and feed. I shall return to you in two days time.*

Lady Arian stood and made her way to the entrance of the cave, she turned around once more looking at Emily and roared 'Approval' loudly; then she left the cave and took to the air.

Above, Valotin was waiting for her. She landed and bowed before him and announced her name and rider, receiving his approval. Essex then stepped forward, at Valotin's request, and led her to the feeding grounds.

Below, Emily was stunned. She was filled with such happiness that she thought she might explode. Slowly she pulled herself together and left the cave. Spying James waiting for her, she headed towards him. She was totally unaware of the change in her appearance. She was fit and trim again with nicely muscled legs and arms, her bust was firm once again and her tummy flat. Her reddish brown hair was long and lush; her face was beautiful to behold. She urgently searched the plateau for Adam but could not see him anywhere.

“James,” she said smiling, still in the throes of the ecstasy she had experienced, “she’s beautiful, absolutely beautiful! Her name is Lady Arian. She’s a deep creamy green color with a golden stripe down her back and also some gold on her face. Oh James, she’s so ... so magnificent! I never expected to be so overcome.” Turning to face Elizabeth she continued quickly, “Oh Elizabeth, she is so wonderful!”

Elizabeth put her arm around Lady Emily and calmed her. The changes in Emily’s physical appearance were nothing short of extraordinary. James came forward and gave her a huge hug.

“Welcome to the Riders of Light Lady Emily. You will be a formidable rider I am sure.” He saw Emily looking about and guessed she was looking for Adam. “He left when your dragon emerged from the cave. I believe he followed her to the feeding grounds. They have a ritual to perform. He will return to you a changed man.”

“Emily, you are stunning!” Elizabeth told her, “Wait till you see yourself, you won’t believe it. Ah, but I imagine you are quite tired out by all this. We’ll get you home so you can rest; the others will have to wait till you are refreshed.”

Elizabeth took her hand and they descended by a back pathway to her house. James went and explained to the others.

Upon seeing the beautiful glistening dragon emerge from the cave, Adam took to the air immediately. He watched curiously as she presented herself to Valotin and his Queen. When she took to the air again following Essex, he tagged along at a discreet distance. Essex spotted him and contacted Valotin informing him that Adam was following them. He was told not to interfere, just to pretend he did not see him. Lady Arian chuckled to herself knowing what was about to take place. As they arrived at the feeding grounds Essex showed Lady Arian the heard and told her to enjoy. He allowed himself to gorge on a few of them also before he headed back to camp.

Adam perched himself in the high trees and watched as she fed. He watched her disembowel a large water buffalo and pick its bones clean. Then she took another quickly and repeated the process. She was very dainty as she went about her task. Fascinated, he couldn’t stop himself from watching.

As she was sinking her teeth into her third beast, Lady Arian, who was aware of Adam perched high up in the trees watching her, said casually:

*I did not realize how hungry I was... mmm... this is very good! I know you are there Adam. You may come down if you wish; I promise I will not eat you, and then she chuckled.*

Fascinated, but not fearing her, he glided to a tree not far from her. He perched himself on one of its large branches and squatted down.

*So we meet at last. Adam began in a soft voice; I have to say that you are quite beautiful. I did not expect that a dragon could be so beautiful.*

*Why ever not? She lifted her head and turned in his direction, I am what the Creator made me, and everything He makes is beautiful - as you yourself are too, Adam.*

She moved closer to him and raised her massive head till she was level with him on his high perch. He saw great intelligence in those large brown eyes of hers.

*Have you seen Lady Emily yet? I think you shall find her very pleasing.*

*No, I didn't stay; I followed you right after you left the cave. Adam matched her stare for stare. I was curious, and to truthfully admit, I wanted to meet you. I cannot explain it; it was such a strong compulsion that I just could not resist it.*

Adam stood up on the branch and reached out to touch Lady Arian's head. She leaned in closer and allowed him to touch her. He felt an immediate electric shock that almost knocked him off his perch. *What was that all about?*

Information began to flow into Adam's mind at an accelerated pace; he was unprepared for this to happen. *Hey, wait...wait; it's coming too fast. I... I can't keep up with you.*

A beam of light shot out of Lady Arian's forehead and hit Adam directly in the heart. He felt her love for him, and for Lady Emily. His wings extended to their full length and he felt himself rising off the branch. But he wasn't doing it! He was suspended before the large dragon, and he could hear her speaking to him.

*I am the Lady Arian, Warrior dragon to the mighty Valotin, Fourth of the Ancients. You are the mate of my rider, Lady Emily. You will not ride a dragon, so I must accept you in a different way. We cannot change what was done to you; but for your soul to heal, we can make it better.*

A beam of such intensity engulfed Adam that he was suspended in the air unconscious. As the light penetrated his being, feathers began to fall off his body. The ground below became covered with the brightly colored feathers, and many more were still gliding down, their iridescence glittering in the rays of sunlight that penetrated the forest. Adam's arms and hands were cleansed, as were his legs and feet. The muscles in his legs were increased, as were his arms and chest. His torso took much more time, as there were delicate areas to be considered. His head was the last to be cleansed of the feathers.

As he slowly came back to consciousness, he was aware of the cold air on his body. Looking down at himself he yelled out in a panic; "Yahhh!"

Eyes wide he could see he was free of the feathers, they littered the jungle floor below, *what the...?* He looked about and locked eyes with Lady Arian.

*This was done for you, and for my Lady Emily. We cannot remove your wings; I would not want to anyway. You are beautiful my friend, Adam. Your wings are as they always were, but your body is that of a man again. I hope you like the change.*

Lady Arian wrapped her wings about Adam and gave him one last burst of bright blue-green light. Adam felt his whole body come alive. It felt good, unbelievably good! His scalp was tingling so strong that he reached up to scratch it. He felt hair - long hair! He looked at his legs and his hands. He touched his face; he was human again - except for the wings. He looked up at Lady Arian with tears in his eyes.

*You do not have to say anything my friend, I can see it in your spirit, and it shines brightly. Now go to Lady Emily and make her happy, she chuckled loudly. Oh my, I am hungry again!*

She was off quickly, licking her lips and chasing a large water buffalo.

Adam brought his thoughts together and collected himself.

*Oh my God! Thank you, thank you, you dear sweet dragon you!*

All he could think about was the effect this would have on Lady Emily. He took to the air immediately and headed towards the town. The cold slapped his body like a jump into a frigid lake. He suddenly realized and laughed at the thought – he was naked! He was flying around over the jungle buck-naked! Without his feathers to keep him warm, Adam was at the mercy of the cold night air. He had to get some clothes quick. His thoughts went immediately to Valotin. He would ask him for help. Concentrating as hard as he could, he sent a message to Valotin.

*Valotin, I need your help. Lady Arian has changed me. My feathers are gone and I need clothes, I'm freezing up here! May I come to you?*

*Adam my friend; was the immediate answer, I am glad to hear your good news. James is coming to the high plateau with clothes for you as we speak. We shall greet you there. Good fortune Adam!*

*This is all very strange, Adam thought to himself. Emily! Oh my sweet Emily, this really changes everything.*

He glided over the mountain and saw James and Valotin waiting for him. As he landed James rushed forward and wrapped him in a large blanket.

“Well, this changes things a bit, doesn't it Adam?” he said chuckling. “Can't have you flying about naked, can we? All the ladies below would go into shock!”

“Maybe that's exactly what they need!” Adam retorted, and James burst out laughing. Valotin chuckled also at his predicament, as did other dragons on the plateau. Feeling utterly silly, Adam started to laugh and soon all three were laughing loudly at the situation.

“I think these will do for now Adam.” James had a pair of jeans and a tee shirt and some shoes and socks. “I wasn't sure about the shoe size. We can get you what you need in Rio when we go to the center.” He looked Adam over and approved the changes. “I don't know how we are going to do this with your wings,” he said holding the tee shirt. In the end they cut it.

“You'll have all the ladies in a twitter, Adam. Better watch out.”

“I'm only concerned about one lady in particular.” He placed his hand on James' shoulder, “Thank you James, I won't forget this act of kindness; or the good laugh we had. I think I needed that more than the clothes!”

He extended his hand to James and they shook. He also went to Valotin and bowed and thanked him profusely.

“Adam, in case you don't know, Lady Emily has changed too.” James told him, “I think you will be pleasantly surprised.” Adam finished dressing and took off quickly. Waving good-bye, he headed straight to Emily's house.

Emily had spent the afternoon in quiet contemplation. She had gone over the whole hatching in her mind again and again recording it to paper before she forgot anything. She was serenely happy. She had taken a shower and inspected her body, amazed at how young she had become. She hoped that Adam would like the changes in her.

She had seated herself in the large chair in her living room and had sketched her dragon several times trying to get just the right look. She was busy on yet another drawing when she heard the familiar sound of Adam approaching.

Excitedly she rose and went out to the deck to greet him. She was not prepared for what she saw. A handsome, well-developed man was landing in her yard!  
“Adam...?” she asked.

As he landed, Adam was thinking to himself, *My God Emily... you are stunning!*  
More than just physical beauty, she seemed to glow from within. From the look on her face he realized that she didn't recognize him.

“Emily! Emily it's me! Lady Arian changed me; she changed me back to a human again. I still have my wings as you can see, but the rest of me...well you can see for yourself.”

He came forward a step and stopped, for a split second he thought she was going to run away. Emily did run, but not away from him; she ran to his open arms and they embraced.

“Oh Adam, let me have a look at you!” She stepped back and looked him over with approving eyes. She ran her hands down his muscled arms and across this large chest; her touches made his body come alive. He was not prepared for this.

“Your eyes have changed too; and your hair...” her voice became low and sultry, “you are absolutely the most handsome man I have ever seen.”

Adam was also going over her with his eyes. She was much younger; her body was in perfect shape. Her breasts were full, and he wanted to touch them so bad he hurt. Her waist was small and curved in and out to her luscious thighs. Her face was lovely beyond compare. He wanted to touch her, run his hands over her body. He take make love to her, but was unsure of how she would respond. At her last remark, he slid his arm around her waist and pulled her to him.

“Emily, I've wanted...” she placed her hand over his mouth.

“No more talking Adam; we've waited long enough.”

He looked into her eyes and all he saw was love. He pulled her to him and kissed her long and hard exploring her mouth. She responded to him by removing her robe and pressing herself to him. He held her in his arms and kissed her again as his wings extended lifting them off the ground.  
“Umm ...oh yes!” she breathlessly exclaimed.

He slowly lowered them to the ground and removed his clothing. She stared at him approvingly.  
“I've wanted this for so long Adam,” she whispered.

Surprised at her openness, he took her in his arms and began kissing her as he lowered her to the soft earth. He caressed her all over pausing only when she moaned at his touch. She had saved his sanity, and now he was going to show her just how much he appreciated it. He loved her like he had never done before. He pleased her before himself and in doing so found a pleasure he had not known. He brought her to the heights of ecstasy where she called out his name in a passion so great that it took him by surprise. Their union did not go unobserved by the population of the jungle. There was a loud chorus of singing throughout the night keeping time with the lovers. At one point Adam took her to the night sky, and there he showed her a new way to make love and the jungle responded with a symphony of its own. The sensual intoxication drove them both to new heights of ecstasy; they experienced a level of passion that was unknown by most. They paced themselves to enjoy each other fully and the chorus of the jungle kept up with them.  
It was a night Emily would never forget.

During the next month, the dragons from the first clutch began to hatch. The changes in the residents of the town were exceptional, to say the least. Elliott received the call one morning and rushed to the hatching grounds in anticipation. Once there he finally met his dragon, the mighty Lazar. He was a large deep midnight blue with gold down its back and gold on its large head marking it as one of Valotin's clan.

When he exited the cave, James could see why Elliott was considered the leader of these people. Gone was the gray hair and elderly appearance, in its place stood a tall man, a leader, confident in his appearance and alert to his surroundings. He was well muscled, a man in his prime, and he carried himself with new confidence and purpose. His sandy brown hair fell to his shoulders, a pleasing appearance that inspired trust. James was impressed.

Lee Chin was called that afternoon; and Valotin called James to his side to await the results. *If what I am told is true, we shall have one of your 'ghosts' once again.* Valotin informed him.

Hours later a large black dragon with gold down its back and two striking gold stripes on each side of its face exited the cave. He flew directly to Valotin and hovered above him. Lee Chin exited the cave and came to Valotin also. The large black dragon landed and both bowed before Valotin. *Hail to the mighty Valotin! I am called Akera, and this is my rider, Lee Chin. We of the Ghost Clan pledge our loyalty and our lives to the cause of all mankind.*

Valotin accepted their pledge and ordered Akera to the feeding grounds, the Queen herself would escort him there. The changes in Lee Chin were nothing if not remarkable. He was well muscled, but still lithe in appearance. His long black hair hung to his shoulders, he was indeed a samurai of old. Valotin directed him to return to his quarters to rest and allow his body to regain its strength. Bowing respectfully, Lee Chin left the plateau.

*Why the difference in the ritual this time Valotin, the Queen escorted Akera to the feeding grounds?* James asked his friend.

*We need spies to tell us where our enemy is and what he is up to. It takes a special breed of human and dragon to accomplish this feat. There will be one more.* Valotin said somberly. *The cost for this action may be very high my friend, so they must agree of their own free will to take up this task.*

*Lady Dee - she's to be one of these 'ghosts' too!* Turning to Valotin, James asked a question he really didn't want an answer to. *Are we to lose these two in the coming battle? Is that why you are so sad my friend? Is the danger to them really so great?*

They watched the plateau below them as Lady Dee made her way up the pathway and went directly to the hatching ground. *So it begins...* murmured Valotin.

Two hours later she emerged from the cavern just after her dragon took to the sky. James could see immediately why she was so good at her job; her beauty was quite arresting, even for him. The ritual in front of Valotin was replayed almost word for word.

*Hail to the mighty Valotin! I am the Lady Ankara, and this is my rider, Lady Dee. We of the Ghost Clan pledge our loyalty and our lives to the cause of all mankind*

All in all, it was very unsettling to both James and Valotin. Lady Ankara was taken to the feeding grounds and Lady Dee instructed to go home and rest.



Valotin explained to James the plan. *My friend, we must be realistic. We need to know what the dark bull is planning, where he sends his minions; we need someone on the inside. They will leave us as soon as their dragons are strong enough to carry them. They go to be trained by Jake himself. If that alone does not guarantee that they will return, then nothing will. They both accepted this task without any reservations. I believe it is the black bull that should have your pity, not these two exceptional souls.*

James understood the seriousness of this situation. *And somehow Adam is tied into all this, correct?*

*They will leave messages all along a preordained path. It will be very high up; there is only one person I know who is smaller than a dragon and can fly to such a high place. The large beast said as he shifted his weight and looked above at Adam flying by.*

*Of course, Adam! He could retrieve the messages and bring them back to you. Have you already asked him? No, wait... he already knows all about this, doesn't he my friend? When Lady Arian changed him, he caught a glimpse of the future battles; he saw what was needed. He came to you and volunteered, didn't he? James knew he was right.*

*You know your people well, James. He also provided some ideas that we hadn't thought about. Did you know that he communicates with all avian life forms; the large condors of the Andes, the Himalayan Harpy eagles, and a host of others. Messages can be taken to the people in all the affected areas where the fighting will take place. We can warn them to take shelter in underground caves and bunkers. Valotin had been thinking about this for some time. He lowered his massive head and continued to relate what he had been doing since learning of this information. Lady Emily has already constructed several hundred small tubes for the birds to carry. Elliott and Cedric have agreed to write the messages.*

James immediately added, *they should be short and to the point; just enough information to let them know that they are not alone. And maybe a short explanation about us would be in order.*

James' mind was working fast now that he was aware of Valotin's plan.

*A thought Valotin, maybe the birds could be used to retrieve messages as well. We could set up relay stations; the Himalayan eagle could retrieve the messages and pass them on to the Andean condor who in turn would pass them to Adam. The black devils would be none the wiser. It would be so fast that we could thwart their plans and disrupt their lines of communication throwing them into disarray. It just might be all we need to drive the big bull to act rashly. All we need is for him to spread his forces out; we could then begin taking them out before they could warn him.*

Valotin's large head nodded in ascent. *A good idea James, one we can implement quickly. Also with the people secured in hidden underground bunkers, their food supply would be taken from them. Valotin chuckled deeply; the bull would soon be unable to control his forces. Divide and conquer. With the three of us coming at him from different directions, he would be caught off guard. His forces would be depleted considerably. I shall inform Ichor and Alakar of our plans.*

*I'm going to go down and see if Lady Emily requires any help. James excused himself; I will talk with you later, my friend.*

Valotin watched James as he left the plateau. *He is very quick on the uptake, and his mind works fast to connect the information and form plans. I am most proud of my brother.*

*Indeed you should be, said a familiar voice, his actions will make this go smoothly. My scouts have returned and I have more news for you my brother. Jake relayed new information for Valotin to share with his fellow leaders.*

James left Valotin on the plateau and followed the pathway down to the town. He headed straight for Emily's house. The door was ajar so he went right in. As he came around the corner he saw Emily in the backyard. She had two long tables set up and she was working on one of the tubes.

He made a loud noise so she wouldn't be startled, "uh-hum, Lady Emily." James called to her, "I hope I'm not disturbing you?" She looked up and smiled at him. He still could not get over the astounding change in her appearance. All of the residents had changed so drastically that James felt like he had to get to know them all over again.

"James, great, I was looking for an excuse to take a break." She put the tube down and grabbed a towel and wiped off her hands. "Would you like some ice tea?" She headed for the kitchen with James following her. "Are you aware of what all this is?" she asked waving her hand about. She grabbed a large pitcher out of the refrigerator and turned around.

"Yes, Valotin filled me in on everything." James answered as he picked up two glasses and held them as she poured tea into them. She placed the pitcher down and headed back to the deck.

"As you can see, I've already made about 200 of them. I don't know how many we will need. Adam is getting that information right now. He sent several hundred hawks out across the European continent to try to spot the various communities of humans. They in turn are going to spread the word to others. We need to get an idea of about how many tubes we'll need. This is all so exciting!" Her eyes were bright and her face aglow with the thrill of it all.

"Have you figured out what we're going to say in the notes?" James asked her.

"Elliott and Cedric are working on that. Once we have the message then we can begin to translate it into the different languages. There's Spanish, German, Russian, etc.; I mean James, the landmass that we will be fighting over is huge. We have to get it right the first time." She took a deep breath, "There are just so many things to take into consideration. I believe that Jake will be sending messages in dreams, so I think that they will be looking for the birds."

As they were speaking Adam lowered himself to the ground and came over. "James, have you heard of our little project?" He extended his hand smiling and James took it.

"We've just been discussing all that is involved in carrying this out." James replied, "I understand you have an ability to communicate with the avian population."

"Yes, I never thought anything about it till recently. Emily, my dear, the hawks from France have returned, they say there are at least 34 small communities in the caves around the countryside. There should be no problem getting messages to them. I'm expecting my friends to return from Germany later this evening. We should have a better idea by then of how many of the little tubes we'll need."

He went to Emily's side and gave her a big smile. "Oh, on the side, my winged friends find this all very exciting. They feel honored to be asked to do this for the First."

"They know of the First?" James asked quickly.

"Oh yes, they know all about us, and why we are here. They are very pleased that they can contribute something to the effort. You know James; they were all hurt just as much as we were. Their homes were destroyed, and many species along with them."

"I hadn't realized Adam, but yes, you're right," James said solemnly, "all of us were affected."

**“Did you know that there are only about sixty little brown spotted wrens left in existence? They left this shelter and went back to the States when they heard it was safe again. They are going to look for survivors and start to build up their ranks again.” Adam looked at James and Emily, “Blue Jays, Cardinals, Meadowlarks, Mocking birds, Whippoorwills, Woodpeckers, Barn Owls, there are so few left. And from what they tell me, most species in Europe were almost completely wiped out.”**

**“I had no idea, Adam.”**

**James looked about him at the variety of birds perched on the branches of the trees. All were quietly watching Adam and himself. He walked out onto the decking and stood there scanning the entire forest before him. He went down the stairs and onto the landing, looking up under the beautiful jungle canopy. Butterflies took flight over his head in a beautiful cascade of color. James looked up and slowly turned in a circle with his arms extended, he was soon covered in butterflies. The scene was almost surreal.**

**The gentle creatures took to the air after several minutes and James walked back up to the deck. He turned around, stood straight, as if at attention, and then slowly bowed to them all. The jungle came alive with calls from all the birds as a loud chorus of approval erupted to fill the air.**

**“They approve James, thank you for acknowledging them.” Adam said somberly.**

**“That was a lovely thing to do James, very lovely.” Emily whispered. “Adam, just a thought here, exactly which birds will be carrying the messages?”**

**“Hawks and falcons for the most part; they can travel long distances without tiring quickly and they have knowledge of the thermals. They are being recruited and will assemble here when you need them. Why do you ask?” He looked at her questioningly.**

**“I need to try out our little device on one of them and see if the tubes are the right size. I want to weight it with some small pieces of paper to see if the bird can carry it. Would you ask one of them to volunteer and come over here to the table?” Emily looked at James and winked, smiling brightly.**

**Adam walked out onto the grass and spread his wings. James could hear him uttering a series of high-pitched warbles.**

**Suddenly a beautiful golden brown hawk keened loudly and glided over to the table. The hawk was magnificent, regal in its bearing; it had a streak of white about its head, much like a crown. It stood perfectly still and allowed Emily to approach. She picked up one of the tubes and rolled a small piece of paper about 3 inches wide and 12 inches long into a tight ball. She then inserted it into one of the tubes. She put the cap back on the tube and then slid a small piece of rawhide thru a tiny slit on the side of the tube. She carefully held the tube to the hawk’s leg and wrapped the rawhide around twice and then tied a knot. The hawk chirped several times.**

**“She says that it is too loose. She will be traveling a far distance; it must be tighter if it is to survive the trip.” Adam translated.**

**“Ok,” Emily whispered as she began again, “let me try this again.”**

**A thought suddenly leaped into James’ mind, “Adam, does this hawk have a name?”**

The hawk chirped and keened a high-pitched warble. “She says thank you for asking, she is the last of her line of golden hawks, and her name is Lady Isis.”

“A beautiful name for so noble a lady,” replied James quickly. The hawk gave a high-pitched cry and was answered by the other hawks immediately.

“They are saluting her James. Hawks do not give out their names easily, I believe she has impressed you.” The hawk called in several tones. James again looked to Adam for translation. “She says you have a gentle spirit color, she likes you. If she makes it thru this and returns, she would like to join your house and live out her days there.”

“Tell her I would be most honored,” James replied bowing to the golden bird.

The hawk then turned to James and spreading her wings, she bowed to him in return. Both James and Adam looked to each other in surprise.

“I have a lot to learn about the life on our planet. I am humbled by this brave little lady,” uttered James to no one in particular.

Emily finished retying the tube and asked Lady Isis to try it out. The beautiful hawk took off and sped thru the jungle lost to sight quickly.

“She’ll be gone at least 15 to 20 minutes. She’s really going to give it a work out.” Adam informed them, “We can relax for awhile.”

James sighed loudly, “Adam, I had no idea that they knew what was going on. I mean, I never thought...”

“I have learned much from the animals here in my garden James. They are kind and do not judge, they are very giving.” Emily smiled at Adam, “Adam has showed me so much about them.”

“They think differently than us James. They came here and found a safe refuge. They saw our plight, so they greeted us in the morning with songs, and filled our days with beautiful music. It is their way. The hawks keep the rodent population under control so that our food reserves wouldn’t be breached. The smaller birds keep the insect population at bay for the same reason. Each did their part so we would be free to complete our task.”

James was reeling at the realization of this happening under their noses; and not one of them recognized it. “I think when this is over; we need to show our appreciation for all their tireless work. I also need to inform the others of this news. They should be aware of our feathered friends and their efforts to make things easier for us all.”

A high pitched keen told them of Lady Isis’ return. Emily went to her and looked at the tube. It was different somehow. She untied it and opened the tube. Inside was a yellow piece of paper and on it was written ‘Good show – it works...signed Elliott.’

“It’s from Elliott! She knew to fly to Elliott, and he put his own message in the tube. This is fantastic; please tell her thank you, Adam, thank you so very much.”

Proudly strutting with her wings extended, Lady Isis keened loudly. “She says that it works well, but she would much prefer a way to drop the thing herself when she is delivering them. She does not fancy

flying to a strange land with starving people. She would not want to be someone's dinner." Adam told them laughing; "you can't fault her thinking."

"Okay," Emily sat down, "okay, she's going to fly over the area and call to the people below, who would be expecting her thru the dreams. Then she's going to drop the tube to them. We need a new design, something simple and easy. Emily began to pace back and forth, "I have to design something that she can open – releasing the tube – but not interfere with her flying." Emily looked around at them, "anybody got any ideas?"

Watching the beautiful hawk walk back and forth across the table, a vision began to form in James's mind. He could see her in a tiny harness with tube fastened on her chest. Made of rawhide strips it crisscrossed her chest with the small tube attached in the front. All she had to do was reach down with her beak and release it. It was so clear in his mind. He raised his eyes and met the strong glare of Lady Isis. He felt himself suspended for a brief moment, seemingly caught in a moment in time. He understood her; for a split second he was one with her, "yes...just like that," he murmured. She keened once and chortled.

"What did she send you James? She said she sent you a picture." Adam whispered.

"A harness," James shook his head back and forth; he looked at the beautiful bird differently this time, and smiled knowingly. "Emily do you have a piece of paper and a pencil?" Emily quickly handed him her sketchpad, James took it and began drawing what he saw. "Its light weight and the tube fit here, in the front. She can reach down with her beak and release it like this," James showed them. "Can you make some kind of release mechanism for her Emily?"

"You bet I can," she said turning to the beautiful golden hawk. "Thank you Lady Isis, you beautiful bird you!"

Two hours of hard work and several trials later, Emily had a prototype ready. Lady Isis tried it on and flew about, telling them that it did not hinder her wings. Emily attached the tube, and asked her to make a pass and release the tube to James's waiting hands. She did so with complete grace, dropping the tube as she flew over James. The harness was a complete success. Now all they had to do was make two or three hundred of them! Emily was going to need help.

James went down to the café in town and called for volunteers to help in the construction of the tiny harnesses. A group of 15 of the native women came to Emily's house and offered their service. A mature woman named, Marita, led them. The riders were surprised when she spoke to them in perfect English. She said that serving these many years with the old ones had allowed her and the other women to learn their language. She explained to James and Elizabeth that she and the other women were well aware of what the riders and great beasts were attempting to do. She said they wished to help in whatever way they could to insure success of this great quest. Emily set up several tables out back and had an assembly line going in no time. She explained to the women what she was doing, and how many harnesses they needed to construct. The women proved to be very adept at making the little harnesses and were very pleased that they were included in this endeavor. They worked right alongside the riders and engaged in conversation with them as they worked.

The birds provided a chorus of cheerful song as all worked diligently over the next few hours. Many commented on the fact of the beautiful sounds and songs they were singing. James decided this was a good time to tell them about the birds and what had occurred earlier. He explained it all to an enraptured audience.

**“Are you serious? My word, I never even gave them a thought,” a somber Elliott whispered. “But you’re right about them always singing; and another thing James, we have never had any problem with rodents or insects getting into the food.”**

**Elliott thought for a moment more, and then he stood up and turned and faced the rain forest. “You say they understand us?” James nodded, and Elliott raised his hands and began to clap shouting out, “Bravo, Bravo to you all!”**

**There was a long silence and then Terry and Sean rose and stepped forward joining Elliott, and began clapping their hands. One, and then four, then everyone rose and followed suit.**

**Every bird stopped what they were doing and watched the humans. In unison they took to the air, soaring higher and higher and then dove down to the forest again. Landing again in the large trees, they let loose with a loud throaty chorus of song.**

**Adam called them all to attention and said quietly, “They are saluting you; they accept your praise and honor you all as well.” He smiled at them and shrugged his shoulders, “it’s a bird thing.” Adam walked out to the forest floor and turned to face the working group. He extended his wings to their full, “It’s about our united battle for our world. Even the smallest form of life is contributing to the fight, in whatever way they can. We are all in this - together.”**

**“Well said Adam, and food for considerable thought,” replied Elliott, “I shall never again take these beautiful creatures for granted.”**

**Marita stood and began to speak to them all, “our prophecies tell of a time when good and evil battle for the souls of all mankind. A great battle will be fought to decide the fate of man; I believe that this is that time. When the burning ones first appeared our Shaman told us of this prophecy. We have been awaiting the great ones who would battle them for some time. When we saw you all coming out of the sky we knew that we would be saved.”**

**There was a loud keen and two reddish brown falcons dove down towards Adam. He held his arms out and they landed, one on each arm. There was a great deal of chirping directed at Adam, and then they took off and landed in a nearby tree.**

**“We have news.” Adam had everyone’s attention. “Emily, James, these two flew to Germany and to England. In Germany they found 56 settlements; England was worse, only 22 well-hidden communities were found.”**

**“My God, there were millions of people in those countries.” Elliott said quietly, “I find it hard to believe that that’s all that’s left.”**

**“I’m still waiting for the rest of my scouts to report in Elliott,” Adam softly added, “there may be more in Spain, and Austria, and Switzerland. Many people fled to the mountains, so that’s where I told them to concentrate their search.”**

**“But the cities, there were so many in the cities.” Terry was shocked there were so few, “perhaps they are hiding in the underground rail stations. Or bunkers left over from the Great War.”**

**Sean joined in, “there were bunkers all over England. Surely some people made it to them for safety.” He put his arm around Terry’s shoulder for comfort.**

**“I’m sorry Terry, but the cities were picked clean.” James related, “They devoured every last human they could find, and then burned everything else to the ground. In the States they learned this fact the hard way; it was a terrible blow to them all. For us it will be even worse, the monster we fight is a beast of the worse kind; he borrows into the subway’s and strikes at the hiding humans.”**

**“Oh no,” Terry was very upset, “I had hoped that some of my countrymen had made it.”**

**“He has depleted Ireland, Scotland, and most of England. He went to the continent when he had enough forces and started again there. We got lucky when that blizzard moved in and trapped him.” James felt the anger rising in him, “We must be ready when the time comes to strike at the heart of him,” he spat out.**

**They worked late into the night and by midnight they were finished. Several of the residents invited the native women to spend the night in their homes. Rather than travel the jungle at night, they happily accepted. The realization that these women had worked for them all these years, and they had never gotten to know them well, weighed heavy on the minds of the former ‘old ones’. They would rectify the situation in the coming weeks.**

Several weeks later, Valotin and Essex were on the top plateau gazing over the early morning scene below. The little town was waking to face another day.

*My liege, we are almost ready to begin the final stage. Ichor and Alakar will be returning by weeks end. Their riders and dragons are well trained and ready.*

*Yes my friend, all is going well indeed, Valotin answered him. The White will be here soon.*

*The White! You have felt him? Are we to lose one to him?* Essex knew that the rider of the White would leave with him when the battle was over.

*Not this time Essex, the White already has a rider; Valotin waited for a moment, Seth is returning.*

*Seth! I had no idea that that one would be called forth again. This changes everything.* Essex knew the legend of this rider and it made him very uneasy. *Should we not prepare James and the Riders? The unpredictability of Seth might endanger them.*

*Do not worry yourself my friend, they will be told. My information tells me that it is a happy Seth that joins us. Even that is dangerous in itself, but Jake assures me that all will be right.*

Valotin shifted his weight. *Remember your prophecies my brother*

Essex eyes grew wide as Valotin chuckled.

*Yes, this may be the last time... He will warn us when he is in the area.*

As the two great beasts looked out over the area they spotted Adam in morning flight. He was gracefully flying in spirals over the ocean with many of the other birds, greeting the day with song and flight.

*A truly remarkable human; he is sensitive to all around him. I am pleased that he finally found his way. He gives great pleasure to man, human and animal alike.* The two great dragons watched Adam for some time enthralled.

Suddenly both dragons were startled at the sound of Jake's agitated voice, *Valotin, are you there?*

*Jake? Yes, Essex and I are here.* Both dragons looked at each other in wonder.

*We have a problem Valotin.* It was rare that Jake would allow his voice to betray any emotion; there was a definite sense of urgency to it now. *When Steve returned from his visit he told all about your camp. Big John and Diana were here showing off their offspring; six babies were born to Diana; three girls and three boys. Unfortunately, she heard Steve tell them all about your birdman, Adam. It seems to have struck a cord with Diana. She was fascinated, and became very excited, telling Wolf that she wanted to meet him. He told her later perhaps, after the battle. You have no doubt heard of her stubbornness? She would not hear of it; even Big John could not control her in this. She was gone this morning, and I believe she and Surfman are headed your way.*

*We shall be on the look out for her. What would you have me do Jake?* Valotin asked, as this was a serious breach in dragon etiquette.

*Use your best judgment. Wolf and Big John are on their way to try and stop her. Warn Adam quickly. Good luck my friends.* The connection was broken.



Adam was soaring out over the ocean, diving, lifting up and spiraling down towards the water again and again. It was a thrilling feeling, and he enjoyed it very much. Several of the great albatrosses were flying with him and shouting greetings. He had just climbed back up to the heights again when the albatross nearest him told him that something very large was approaching from out of the thermals. The birds hurried away at great speed.

Adam turned around in mid-air and spied above, he could see nothing; but then the albatross was noted for their keen eyesight. He hovered in the air and scanned the sky above. Gradually he began to make out a small black dot in the upper air coming straight at him. As it got larger he realized it was a dragon. He watched in fascination as it came closer. It was a bright deep blue and appeared to have a rider.

*It's a Blue Dragon, like the ones Steve told me about, I wonder what it is doing here.* He thought to himself.

Valotin's voice boomed in his mind telling him what had happened and warning him to be careful. Adam told Valotin that he was too late. He was watching a large blue approach from the thermals as they spoke. He continued to watch in wonder as the Blue dragon came closer. Its rider was awash in the golden hues of the sun, and was standing on the dragon's back.

*This must be the dragon woman,* Adam thought. He decided to take the initiative and flew up to greet them.

As he got closer the Blue Dragon called out to him, "Greetings and salutations Bird-man, from the Blue Dragon Clan!"

The rider was a golden goddess whose childish grin gave her away.

*This must be Diana,* Adam thought as she approached waving at him.

They flew down and circled him and then hovered before him. Adam was impressed at their flying abilities.

"Hello birdman! Steve told us about you and I had to come and see for myself. I am Diana of the Blue Dragon Clan." He recognized her demeanor right away; she was indeed a child.

"You are beautiful! Your wings are a wonder! Do you have a name?" She asked him breathlessly.

"My name is Adam lovely lady; and your dragon's name?" Adam shouted back.

"Surfman dude, the one and only!" He confidently yelled back. "May we fly and dive with you? The sight of you has my sister wound up tighter than a rogue wave; she is just itching to fly with you."

"I would be honored," said Adam taking off to the heights with Surfman right behind.

Adam and Surfman flew thru a series of dives and attack formations. Diana dived with him towards the ocean and leaped off of Surfman and dove straight in. She surfaced with Adam laughing heartily. She climbed up onto Surfman's wing all the time hailing Adam as a great treasure. He was totally enthralled with her innocent way and child-like enthusiasm.

The sight of two large dragons approaching threw Surfman into an agitated state.

"Oh man... we are in for it now Diana! Look who's coming, it's Valotin, and Essex is with him! You know that means Wolf is on his way. I told you we would be found out. Man... he is going to ground our butts for sure!"

**“I do not care! He cannot order me about as if I were a child,” she said haughtily.**

**Adam smiled at her response and listened as she continued to rant.**

**“I wanted to see this wonder for myself,” she turned to Adam eyes wide and smiled, “and you are a wonder Adam. How high can you go? Can you reach the thermals? Have you fought in any battles yet?” She was oblivious to the chaos she had caused.**

**“My Lady slow down, you’re going to fast. You may get us both in trouble,” Adam told her.**

**As Valotin and Essex approached Adam could see James and Vail on their backs. Adam heard Valotin calling to him to keep her there as long as he could. He then remembered what Steve had told him, *Of course! She’s unable to hear them telepathically. James would have to relay what was said to her.***

**“Hail Lady Diana, Surfman. Please, follow us to a landing on the large plateau below.” James called out to her with a stern voice; Adam knew it was an order, not a request. Valotin was buying time till Wolf arrived.**

**Adam turned and headed for the plateau before she had a chance to answer. She and Surfman followed him quickly. As Adam approached he saw Lady Emily below with Lady Elizabeth and Lady Amanda.**

**Surfman glided in and Diana jumped off and came running over as Adam was landing. Eyes aglow she asked if she could touch his wings. He was taken aback and Diana saw him look at Emily questioningly.**

**Diana laughed loudly, “Fear not Lady, I do not want your mate, my heart belongs to Big John. I just want to touch his wings; he is so beautiful and most amazing!”**

**Seeing her childlike actions and realizing she had no ulterior motive, Emily nodded to Adam, “Do what you want Adam, it is your body.”**

**Valotin and Essex landed and James and Vail came over to the group. James was not prepared to see Diana running her fingers thru Adam’s wings and cooing in delight. He looked at Adam questioningly, who replied with a shrug of his shoulders.**

**“Oh you are wonderful!” Diana was grinning broadly and her eyes were dancing in approval. Her child-like way struck the ladies; she was oblivious to the breach of etiquette she had caused. They could see that she really was an innocent; this was not done as an act of defiance, but rather like a petulant child wanting her way.**

**As they stood there on the plateau, Surfman suddenly blurted out, “Oh man... here comes Wolf and Big John. Diana, you really did it this time.”**

**Adam couldn’t help but laugh at the outburst. He quickly stopped himself but not before Diana had heard him. James and Vail turned away trying to keep from laughing too. Wolf and Big John called to Valotin and asked permission to land. Granted, they glided in and Big John climbed down and headed straight towards Diana, he was not a happy man. Wolf stopped as he passed by Valotin and bowed in respect, and then continued towards Diana.**

**“Diana!” Wolf boomed in tightly controlled anger, “did I not forbid you to do this? Were you not told that these people were on a strict schedule and did not need you to disrupt them?” Turning towards Surfman he continued, “How could you let her talk you into this?”**

**The riders on the ground were silent as this was going on. Adam was still reeling at the fact that the Blue Dragons actually spoke.**

**“Ah Wolf, my liege, uh sir,” began Surfman sheepishly, “ah man...you know how she is. She just would not listen...” Surfman tried to explain.**

**“Bullfeathers! You knew better than to let her have her way! She has other duties that require her attention,” he was face to face with Surfman now, “there are six of them that I can think of right off hand! These are just bogus excuses!” Wolf was livid.**

**Big John reached Diana and he was just as mad, “Diana, how could you defy Wolf like this? Do you not realize what you have done?”**

**Diana did not back down from Big John. She marched past him squinting up her face at him as she stomped by defiantly. By this time James and Vail had their hands over their mouths trying not to burst into fits of laughter.**

**Diana went straight to Wolf and stood there glaring up at him. It made quite a picture; this small defiant woman-child and this huge dragon looming over her. She stomped her foot and roared at him wagging her finger, “How dare you yell at me like that! I have done nothing wrong; I just wanted to see the birdman for myself.”**

**“Do not raise your voice to me!” Wolf bellowed.**

**“I am Queen of Blue Clan and I will do...”  
Wolf roared loudly and shot out a huge blue flame.  
Diana was silenced, but there was still fire in her eyes.**

**“Diana, you have disobeyed a direct order.” Wolf said in a softer tone. “This cannot go unpunished. You do not have special privileges that allow you to defy me; you know this little one. If it was that important to you, we could have arranged something.”**

**Diana sat down on the grass below Wolf and began to cry... actually, she began to howl. All the dogs came rushing from the jungle and began to join her, howling loudly. The two Blue dragons were thrown into a state and started to keen just as loud. The other dragons on the plateau hearing the commotion began to keen also. Big John threw his hands up in the air and plopped down besides her, holding his head in his hands.**

**James and Vail could not hold it in anymore and laughed loudly. They found the whole thing quite funny. *Valotin my friend, I am trying not laugh but it is most difficult. We must do something here.***

***I agree with you James, I am trying not to laugh myself.* Valotin rose up and boomed out, *Enough!***

**The entire plateau went silent.  
Diana stared at him and there was fear in her eyes.**

Valotin turned to Wolf; *No harm was done, Wolf. Let her stay for the afternoon meal, my riders would enjoy a break in their training. You may deal with this when you return home.*  
James relayed the same thing in a stern voice to Diana and Surfman.

A smile played across Diana's face as she stood up and seductively made her way to Big John.

"Please do not be angry with me, my husband," she cooed in a singsong voice taking his hand and pressing it to her breast, "You see, no real harm has been done. Please John, man of my heart," she pressed herself against his large chest and laid her head on it keening like a queen dragon; Big John didn't stand a chance, she had him mesmerized.

Elizabeth watched in fascination and then called to James; *oh my, she is good. James did you see that; she is behaving just like a Queen Dragon!*

James replied quickly, *yes I am well aware of her abilities. But she broke a basic law. Child or not, she will have to be dealt with severely. I'm just glad I am not Wolf!*  
They both chuckled quietly under their breath.

James led the small group off the plateau and down to the town. There was a big stir among the residents, each wanting to get a look at the strange woman who thought she was a dragon. Diana seemed to like all the attention. She had learned much since her first days at Dragons Hill. Terry came forward as they entered the large dining area and winking at James and Elizabeth he went straight to Diana and began to work his magic. He was all smiles and fawned over her, complementing her on her extraordinary beauty and flying abilities. James guessed that he was doing this at the request of Valotin and Wolf. Diana loved the attention and was soon chatting up a storm with him and Sean. When Adam entered she insisted he sit with them.

James and Elizabeth watched as everyone eventually got a chance to have a word or two with her. She was working the room with great skill, unabashedly blunt and delightful at the same time. She understood completely how Terry and Sean could be mates; many in her own clan did not have female mates.

She thought Reggie was very scary, 'like Lady Sarah' she told him. He considered it to be the highest compliment he had ever received.

She thought Theo and Susanna were royalty from Africa. They both laughed at that one, and then belched loudly.

All in all, she was a big hit with everyone.

Big John spied James and Elizabeth watching Diana and walked over to them smiling. "Thank you for your patience James, I know she disrupted your camp. When she gets this way there is absolutely no way to control her. Wolf will handle her when we get home."

Elizabeth congratulated John on the birth of his children, "Six at one time! My goodness, that is truly amazing. You must have your hands full?"

Big John laughed, "Diana never does anything small. They are a handful, but the dragons help quite a bit. They are three months old but seem more like a year." He noted the surprise in Elizabeth's eyes. "They have all their teeth now, thank God. You haven't lived till you have six babies cutting a mouthful of teeth all at the same time."

"Oh my," exclaimed Elizabeth, "how do you do it?"

**“The dragons helped in keening and easing their pain. I believe that’s when they bonded with their different dragons. They have even begun to talk with them on a telepathic level; they are sending them pictures and feelings. Several of them appear to have telekinetic abilities. The dragons are very excited about it. They say that the children are growing faster than normal because they have a task to do.”**

**Elizabeth’s surprised showed in her eyes.**

**“Yes I know,” said Big John, “but nothing surprises me anymore with these children; they are all very special. But then look at their mother; she is a wonder in herself.”**

**Elizabeth and James could see his love for Diana shinning in the large man’s eyes. “Yes she is John,” Elizabeth added, “I imagine she keeps you running a lot.”**

**“That, dear lady, is an understatement. In battle she is fearless; many times I have seen her and Surfman take on two or three of the devils and laugh as they turned them to dust. I do not doubt her love for the children, but she is a child still herself in many ways. Yes, she is one of a kind; sometimes I fear I may loose her. But I would not give any of this up. As stubborn as she is at times, she does have her moments,” he smiled knowingly.**

**Diana ended up getting her way and flew for an hour with Adam uninterrupted. She and Surfman raced high above with him and dove from the heights into the ocean. They matched him for speed, but could not match his agility in the air.**

**As they dove down and soared just a few feet above the ocean, dolphins broke the water surface and raced the two sparring flyers. Diana squealed with delight at the sight of them. The afternoon was spent in races, and various maneuvering tactics. Those on the ground were witnesses to a spectacular air show of a different sort. Adam was nearly spent by afternoons end.**

**As they waved their good-byes from the plateau at the departing dragons Adam whispered to James, “Thank heavens that is over! I haven’t had that kind of a workout in a long time. It took everything I had to keep up with her,” James turned around in surprise, “and she never even cracked a sweat James.” Adam shook his head, “I have never met anyone like her! I’ll tell you one thing I do not envy Big John; I don’t see how he handles her?”**

**“Sex, Adam, pure and simple,” James replied with a devilish grin. “If she doesn’t listen and behave, she does without. From what I understand, she likes it a lot. So for now, he has the upper hand so to speak.” By the time he was done with his explanation, they were both laughing.**

**“Whoa...! Absolutely priceless!” roared Adam. “All laughter aside James, I wouldn’t want to get on the bad side of that woman. She would be relentless and a formidable enemy. And Surfman’s flying ability is awesome to say the least; he can do things I’ve never seen a dragon do before.”**

**“You forget Adam; I have seen them both in action, and they scared the hell out of me. I think that’s why their Clan has the honor of freeing the Pacific, Japan, and Asia. Their skills will be sorely needed to complete that task, and they will be fighting alongside Enaj, the Sleeping One,” James told him.**

**“Who is this Enaj you speak of?” Adam asked.**

**“Oh that’s right, you don’t know about the Sleeping One.”**

"I'm all ears." replied Adam.

"Well the prophecy goes like this, 'in the last battle the Seeping One will awaken and the great leviathan will join the Blue Clan, along with the Yellow Lion Clan, and free Asia from the last of the dark evils.' All I know for sure is that it is huge," James relayed, "and can change shape when needed. But the spooky thing is that it is controlled by a child."

Both men parted after paying their respects to Valotin. Adam took to the skies as James headed down towards the town.

After everyone had settled in for the night Valotin and Essex met on the high plateau to discuss the day's events. They were still both amused by the young dragon-woman and the uproar she caused in her desire to meet the birdman. There was a long chuckle shared by the two friends at the task still waiting Wolf - how to reprimand Diana for disobeying his orders.

*Yes, he has his hands full with that one, Valotin chuckled, I am glad I do not have that problem.*

*Valotin, earlier today you mentioned that the White would soon be in the area. Is he on a particular quest?* Essex tilted his head upward and watched as Adam flew to Lady Emily's house and glided down.

*He is on the search for the child who will awaken the 'Sleeping One'. He reported that there were four 'Seekers' on the trail of something. You know how relentless those creatures can be when they get the scent.*

Essex nodded in agreement.

*It appears that the black bull charged them and sent them out before he went into hibernation.*

Valotin shifted his massive weight and stretched. He then curled up and made himself comfortable for the night.

Settling himself as well, curling up beside his friend, Essex continued.

*Do you have the location of the 'Sleeping One', or will the child know instinctively? I have some limited knowledge of the power that this leviathan wields that only a child can control!*

*Yes my friend, the tales are true. Valotin relayed some small bit of information to his friend, a child is pure of heart, and a female, just before she comes of age, a virgin if you will, is the purest of all. If there are 'Seekers' on her trail, then she is in terrible danger. I have no doubt that the White and Seth will protect her, but first they have to locate her.*

A dark shadow glided slowly over the land gracefully covering the rocks and boulders as if it were a slow moving wave, wrapping itself around every nook and cranny. The freshly fallen snow highlighted the shadowy outline of dragon and rider. Down below, some miles distant, pressed to the back wall of a small cave a child cowered in fear. She could not let them find her - not yet.

High above the White and Seth scanned the area relentlessly. The 'Seekers' had gone to ground for the day. Seth figured that they must have a really good scent to lie up for the entire day.

*Hey Whitey, does she know what she is doing, I mean, where she is going and why? Is it her or all instinct acting?*

*We both know the legend, Seth. She will be drawn to the Leviathan, only knowing that her friend needs her and she must get to him. She will look to all dragons as the enemy until we find her. We have to get to her before they do and show her that we are her friends. There are only four of the 'seekers'; we need to take them out as quickly as possible. Ah below, look!*

Seth leaned over the side of the White and looked below; his eyesight was as keen as any dragons. He saw the small tracks that led directly to a rocky ravine with several cave openings. *She's got be in one of them, should we land and take a look?* Seth asked his old friend.

*That would be unwise right now, she still thinks of us as the enemy. We will have to wait till she is in danger, and then come to her rescue. It will be the only way to convince her that we are not her enemy. The White flew to a peak and settled on its plateau.*

*We can stay and wait it out, or we can return this evening when they get active again. I for one can use a decent meal and Valotin offered his feeding grounds. Come on Seth, you'll have plenty of chances to destroy that filth. We don't get free meals of this magnitude too often.*

*You talked me into it Whitey. Maybe I'll get to see that birdman of theirs; I hear he's quite a sight. The Blues are all talking about him and Surfman's flight with him.* Seth related to his friend.

The White took off and headed back towards the continent of South America. He flew to the heights and copped a ride on a thermal. They were there in mere minutes.

*Seth, I want your word, no going into the town. Promise me ... no women!*

*Ah Whitey, you're no fun!*

This statement brought a stern look from his friend.

*Okay, okay! I won't bother any of the humans, I promise.*

The White informed Valotin of their presence and their intentions of filling themselves at the feeding grounds. Valotin told them they were free to eat as much as they wanted. He also informed them of the birdman's' existence and told them not to worry if they should see him flying, as he was a friend.

*Why didn't you tell him we already knew of the birdman, Valotin and Essex are the good guys, aren't they?*

Seth stared at the White.

*Oh! Don't want them to know just how much we know already, huh? My friend, you've got to trust sometime.*

*Need I remind you that that is exactly what got you killed last time? This time we are playing for all the marbles Seth; we can't afford to make any mistakes.*

The White still found Seth's cavalier attitude unsettling, even after all this time. He settled his massive body down on a small plateau overlooking the huge herd.

Seth climbed down and walked over to his friend, reached up and wrapped his arms around his massive neck and gave him a squeeze.

*We have the Big Guy on our side Whitey, what better odds could you ask for? It's just how much damage the black one will inflict on the humans that we have to be concerned about.*

Seth stood on the plateau with his hands on his hips scanning the heard below.

*This is a pretty good bunch; I mean, come on, they didn't go all holy on us now did they? This group seems to be pretty level headed; they seem to have their priorities straight.*

The White added, *and their women are willing to fight right along side their men.*

Seth picked up and continued, *Hell, Ichor even has one as his rider, a nice little piece of ass I might add. She's got to be one hell of a fighter to be able to flame an Ancient.*

Seth removed his bow and reaching behind his back took an arrow and aimed at a good-sized kudu. He brought it down swiftly; it was dead before it hit the ground with not so much as a tremor within the herd. The White then rose in the air and let the herd see his approach; they began to run. He singled out a beast and dove and scooped it up quickly, savoring the taste. When he was finished he went for a second, all the time keeping an eye on Seth as he skinned the kudu. When he had satiated his stomach, he headed back to his friend. Seth had just finished quartering his kill and had it set up on several spits.

*Now that you are full as a tick, care to give me a flame my friend.*

The White flamed the meat and soon Seth was filling himself as well.

All of this had taken place under Adam's watchful eyes. Spying the two on their way to the hunting grounds, he had called back to Valotin and informed him of what was taking place. That it was the hawks who had told him of two new hunters approaching the area. He had taken it upon himself to check it out. Valotin explained to Adam who these two were and asked him to give them a wide berth. Sitting on the branch Adam watched, sizing them both up. The man was well-built, great muscled arms, chest and legs - a warrior no doubt. Adam watched as he went about his task. His hair was black as night and tied at the nape of the neck; he had a dark mustache and beard. Even from this distance Adam could see his hazel eyes, they were mesmerizing. Adam guessed that a woman would find him very attractive. Deciding to heed Valotin's warning, he was getting ready to take his leave when Adam heard himself being called.

*You may come into camp birdman; my friend and I would like to meet you.*

The White's voice was inviting, almost commanding.

Adam hovered above them; *I was told by Valotin to give you both a wide berth, I would not disobey his orders.*

*You fear us then?* Seth smirked as he stood and looked above.



*Fear!* Adam answered dubiously, mocking Seth. *Ha, fear and I are old friends, like its partner, pain - we know each other very well. No sir, I do not fear you. I only respect the request of my friend, Valotin.*

*A wise man and a very eloquent one!* Seth was intrigued, *Whitey, would you please ask Valotin if we might speak to this brash would-be warrior.*

The White called to Valotin and explained the situation, promising all would be well.

*Adam, if you wish, you may join them.* Valotin cautioned in Adams' mind, *choose your words well my friend.* Adam glided down to the hilltop and stayed a good distance away from them.

Seth inspected the birdman carefully. *Man did this to you?* Seth spat out the words, fire in his eyes.

*Yes,* Adam answered coldly, *a man driven insane by his work.*

*You hate him for this, would like to kill him for this betrayal...*

*No...I do not hate him for it.* Adam looked Seth straight in the eyes, *I have gone beyond that, and I do not need it any longer.*

**“I would’ve ripped him apart!”** Seth shouted. *Sorry, but I would have.*

Adam spread his wings and replied softly, *a friend showed me that hate leads to all the painful things, and soon you become immersed in a quagmire that you can’t get out of. Now that I am free of it, I will not fall prey to its seduction again.*

*Aha, very good.* The White uttered softly, *you have learned, and learned well. I smell a healer’s hand in all this; Jake has been your teacher, has he not young one?*

*Yes he has.* Adam answered a bit defiantly. *He saved me from almost certain madness. In learning truth, I recognized the cancer of hate, after that it was easy and I escaped the pit.* Turning to Seth, Adam asked, *and what of you?*

*Ha!* Shouted Seth, hands on his hips, *not many would have the courage to ask.* Seth quickly sized up the strange man. *I like you birdman, what is your name?*

*You answer my question and I’ll answer yours,* replied Adam.

Seth stared at Adam for a long time, as if deciding something. He finally answered; *I still carry anger and hatred for the dark ones, and some for man.* He added as an after thought, *but it fuels our flame, so I am granted that small concession, for now at least.*

*They call me Adam, first of my kind,* Adam replied, not as a boast, just a statement of fact.

They spent an hour bantering back and forth, each trying to find out what the other knew. In the end Seth decided that he really liked this Adam, he would like to get to know him better if it were possible. But knowing what was waiting for him he doubted he would get the chance.

As the sun was setting the White told Adam that they had to take their leave. *Seth we must go.*

**Seth stood and faced Adam, *Duty calls, and we have some vermin to get rid of.* He climbed up onto the White and they were soon airborne and heading back to the heights.**

**Adam watched til they were out of sight then flew directly to Valotin and informed him of everything that had occurred. The conversations that took place during the afternoon; the fact that he felt they were fishing for information.**

**Then he told Valotin, *I got the distinct impression that this Seth is not, um, not entirely human.***

**Valotin moved his large body around and lowered his massive head to Adam. *He is an ancient one, for you see Adam, he fought in the first battle with the dark ones.***

**Surprise showed on Adam's face; not only about this new information on Seth, but that Valotin trusted him enough to tell him.**

**Valotin's voice softened as he added, *you see my friend, it was Seth's dragon, Bethon, turned to madness at the death of its mate, that started all this. In his grief at losing his wife and her dragon, Seth had to hunt his own down and destroy him. It left a mark of great rage and anger on him; and in his anger he lashed out and took an innocent's life. He was hunted down by his own kind and in a rage he did the unthinkable. Now he must find a way to rise above himself and do the right thing.***

***How sad for him, Valotin. Adam looked up at the great beast; I credit you and Jake for my deliverance. Without you two, I might be like that, filled with anger and never finding peace. I thank you both every day for what you have done for me.***

**Valotin chuckled at this; *It was you who changed yourself, Adam. You saw the truth and applied it to your life. We only pointed it out to you. Now go my friend, Lady Emily is looking for you.***

**Adam took to the skies and headed towards Emily's house. He felt blessed that he had her and all the people here at Dragons Bay.**

Two days later Ichor returned with his dragons and riders. They were a changed group from the defiant and angry students that had hidden in that cave in Siberia. These were a sound group of well-developed young men and women glowing with an inner light. Each had taken to training with gusto and had excelled in every aspect. Sarah and Jackson had trained them in the use of the crossbow and each was a deadly shot. Sarah had included in her training the importance of unity when fighting, the importance of no negativity in their ranks. She explained the strength between rider and dragon and the source of the dragon's flame. Nightly hashing out of problems quickly brought them all together as brothers and sisters. They fought as one, each looking out for the other. They were all an exceptional group and would prove to be extremely deadly in battle.

Valotin gave great praise to Ichor and Sarah for their exceptional group. Ichor lavished praise on Sarah and Jackson, saying that it was their unique training of the men and women that produced such a formidable fighting team. Sarah refused any praise, saying she was simply following her mighty friend's advice and trained her people using plain old common sense.

Now almost ready, Valotin suggested to Ichor that now would be the ideal time to invite the Indian Shaman to the camp. He told him he wanted the Shaman to see what Ichor had done with the two children he had brought to the dragons. An invitation was extended and the little Shaman came to the plateau in pomp and ceremony. He went before Ichor and stared in shock. The children he had brought to Ichor now stood before him a young man and woman who were beautiful in both body and mind.

Tonito, the young boy was now a tall muscled youth with long black hair and eyes that marked him as a descendent of the Inca. Amrita, the girl, was a tall, well-proportioned young woman whose beauty was rare indeed. Both showed an intelligence that was not present before. Knowing more now than this Indian Shaman did, they still treated him with respect and honor. They both bowed to the little Shaman, and pledged that they would not disgrace their people. The Shaman was very pleased and thanked Ichor for allowing him to see the wonder that the dragons had worked on these two young people.

Alakar and Peter returned with their group and left almost as quickly. Their group was a fit and cunning force. Reggie and Cynthia had trained the new riders well. Each rider and dragon was looking forward to the coming battle with great excitement. They all knew that they would win the fight, and their world would be free at last.

Two days later Alakar and his group left for the shores of Ireland to begin ridding that area of all the stragglers the dark one left behind. They swept through Ireland like a wildfire and that land was soon free. They moved on to Scotland and then England, ridding the land of all the vermin and freeing the people. Hesitant at first, the people began to come out and hail the riders as deliverers. They thanked them profusely and begged to see their mighty beasts. A word from Alakar and they were only too happy to do whatever the riders asked.

All was poised in readiness for the signal from Valotin to begin the push.

Adam's hawks and falcons showed up at Lady Emily's as they promised and each was fitted with the rigging and messages they were to deliver. Wave after wave could be seen leaving her house as they sped on their way to the various parts of the European continent.

A few days later, James and Valotin were on the high plateau with Ichor and Sarah planning their strategy when Valotin heard the White calling to him in distress.

*Valotin, we seek a landing, quickly please, the child and Seth have been injured. Valotin looked above and saw the White spiraling down towards them.*

*Sarah, please go and stand beside Ichor; do not draw any attention to your self, Valotin ordered quickly. The White and Seth are approaching; James to my side!*

Valotin called to Nigel to bring his medicine bag and come to the top immediately. Turning towards the approaching White, he granted him a landing.

Sarah watched from behind Ichor's right wing as the White landed. She could see that Seth held a bloodied child in his arms; both he and the White were also bloodied as well. She couldn't be sure whose blood was whose.

Seth dismounted and slid off the White just as Nigel came onto to the plateau. Nigel did a double take at the fierce looking man as he stood there with the bloodied child in his arms. Quickly sizing up the situation Nigel went straight to the child as Seth laid her on the ground. She was a tiny thing, eight or nine years of age; soft curly hair, black as night, encircled an angelic face. She had several gashes on her legs and one rather large one on her torso. Blood was everywhere.

"I must get her to my clinic, I can properly care for her there," he told no one in particular. "We need to get her there fast."

Adam had landed unnoticed and now he stepped forward and offered, "I'll take her Nigel," they watched as he bent and picked her up in his arms.

"Go! Hurry! I'll meet you there." He looked to Seth and saw relief in his eyes, "you need looking to also." With that Adam was airborne and headed towards Nigel's clinic in seconds.

Valotin looked to the White, *are you injured also? Can we be of help?*

*Look to Seth, he is hurt also. The devils had her trapped in a small ravine. We could not get to her fast enough. Seth drew them out and they got him several times. The White looked towards his friend and then back at Valotin, please see to him first, and thank you, old friend*

Valotin turned towards Ichor, who in turn ordered her. *Sarah, you must leave the plateau quickly, I will explain later.*

Sarah headed down the path towards the clinic; and Seth watched her body as she moved and a smile played its way across his rugged face.

*Get your mind out of the gutter Seth, shouted the White, you're in no condition to do any of that!*

*James, follow my lead, Valotin warned his rider, this could get tricky.*

Turning to Seth, Valotin asked, *where are you injured rider, what may we do to ease your pain?*

*I don't need any help. I will be...* he took a deep breath and his brow furrowed in pain, *I will be fine.* Seth took a step and faltered going to his knees. James started to go to his side when Seth quickly held out his hand; *No, I do not need your help, human!*

James looked to Valotin for advice just as Adam returned. Fearlessly he walked over to Seth and bent and put his arm around Seth's waist and lifted him to his feet. Seth tried to angrily wrest himself free but seeing it was Adam, he relaxed.

**"You are injured and need help; at least let us see to your wounds. You are no good to us injured and unable to fight."**

This Seth understood and he nodded in agreement. Adam removed a first aid kit Nigel had given him from his satchel. James stepped over and began to access his injuries. He cleaned his wounds and began to wrap them in gauze.

**"You will need stitches in these if they are to heal quickly. Nigel is very good at it; I can bring him here after he sees to the child."**

**"The child first,"** Seth hissed. **"See to her first, I can wait. May I have some water, I thirst."** They could all see that Seth had lost a lot of blood and was very groggy. He sat down on the ground near the White and leaned back on the great dragon's leg. Adam brought him some water and he drank greedily.

*Sorry my friend, the bastards got me good.*

Seth dropped the bowl of water and slipped into semi-unconsciousness.

Valotin asked the great white beast if the dragons were destroyed. *One got away, but he is not going far. You will find him hiding in a small ravine. Look into my mind and see the area. Finish him off for us my friend, please. We had to get the child here as fast as possible.*

*Essex! Vail! I have need of you both, come to the plateau quickly,* Valotin called out.

Vail and Essex arrived within minutes and Valotin gave them directions to where the fallen beast was hiding. He instructed them to destroy it quickly. They left immediately to complete the task before the injured dragon could warn anyone.

Forty-five minutes later Nigel returned to the plateau. **"The child will recover. She lost a lot of blood, but she has a strong will. Her wounds were not too serious as we got to her in time, they will heal."** Looking to Seth he walked over to him and bent down. **"Now, let's look at the rider."**

Valotin called to him quickly, *Nigel wait! He cannot be approached just like that.*

Addressing the White, Valotin asked him to tell Seth to allow the doctor to see to his wounds. At a promise that Adam would be there he allowed Nigel to approach and tend to his wounds. Six stitches on one arm, three on his face, and twelve on his thigh left Seth in a foul mood.

The White knew his rider needed a restful night. *May we stay the night Valotin? This troublesome whelp needs to rest if he is to be any use to me.*

Valotin nodded and added, *I will have food and drink brought up for your rider my friend. But he is to remain here.*

*You can have that Amazon wench bring me some drink;* Seth said groggily, *she was quite an eyeful!* Ichor bristled at that remark and raised himself up, glaring at Seth.

The White looked down at Seth, *You are in no condition to be giving orders to anyone. You couldn't even take out four dragons without getting yourself all chewed up!*

*Hey, I got three of them! It wasn't my fault you didn't warn me about the fourth. Besides, the child was in the way, I couldn't risk a shot at it.* Seth leaned back, drifting in and out of consciousness.

James and Nigel and Adam were incredulous. *He slew three dragons himself?* James asked. *My word,* whispered Nigel under his breath. *I'm not at all surprised,* added Adam.

The White looked at the three men for some time. *He is Seth, the Slayer. He slew dragons long before your world had knowledge. At one time he could have been one of the Winged Ones.*

The White stared intently at Seth for a bit as if remembering. Adam noticed the sadness that seemed to be hidden in his eyes. The White shook his huge head and continued, *but that was a long time ago and fate has a way of changing things. He has a great force within him that allows him to do the things he does; he now fights to save mankind and perhaps himself as well. He also has great lusts; keep your women away from him. He can be a randy devil when the mood suits him and your women would be powerless. Your Sarah has already caught his eye, but he knows she rides Ichor, which in itself may protect her.*

Valotin rose to his full height, *we will do as you ask. If you require anything at all just let me know and it will be done. We leave you now.*

Valotin ordered them all off the high plateau and cautioned them all to warn the women to keep away for the time being.

As they headed down the path they talked among themselves about the strange rider of the White. It was Adam who was the least surprised at the actions of Seth. Knowing full well what he had been through, they took his words to heart.

“Apparently he’s fought this battle many times before; he’s probably lost a great deal more than we could possibly imagine. I get the feeling that there is a sort of redemption waiting for him; perhaps he can find some kind of peace this time, after this is over.”

Hannah was sitting on a jetty watching her dragon dive into the sea. The pretty girl with the light tan and the curly auburn hair was enjoying the moment. As her dragon surfaced she would sail by Hannah and let her scrub her back with the strong brush she had made for her. Ever since she and Lady Vesta had met, Hannah's life had been a whirlwind. She had never had such a true friend; a friend who accepted her just as she was. Her enhancement had been just the beginning. The scars from the burning had slowly disappeared, and her body had become strong and beautiful. Her great huskies were enhanced along with her and they tripled their size. They patrolled the town and roamed the surrounding area keeping it safe. The little puppy she had saved turned into a huge gray wolf, and was always by her side.

Hannah had watched as all her friends paired up in the months before and after her dragon hatched. She had hoped that she would find someone too; but that had not happened; she had not found anyone to whom she felt attracted. She spent her off time with her dragon, exploring the jungle area, playing in the bay, and practicing with the crossbow. She had become a deadly shot and prided herself in that knowledge. Ichor had asked her if she did not find the men attractive, and all she could say was that they were not meant for her. He had hinted about and asked if perhaps she would prefer something different and she had laughed and put him at ease saying that she would know when she met her mate. No, she was very contented right now. She looked forward to the coming battle; she wanted to prove herself to Ichor and all the other riders in her group. She knew her mate was out there somewhere, and she was sure that he would make himself known when the time was right.

So here she was down at the Bay relaxing. She had seen the flurry of activity on the high plateau earlier in the evening. She knew that something important had happened, and was sure that they would all be told when the time was right. So she had stayed at the shore with her dragon while everyone else was told to keep away from the high plateau, especially the women, and the reason why.

Seth awoke to a shining moon. He lay there for a moment listening to the sounds of the night jungle. He stirred and tried to rise; he was stiff all over.

*Ah, this won't do at all. Maybe a short splash in the ocean, he thought, the water would ease up these stiff bones.*

Unsteady, he rose and looked about. The White was curled up next to him asleep.

*No sense in waking him, he needs to rest too.*

Slowly, he made his way off the plateau. He hadn't realized how banged up he really was. He knew he had taken several blows from their tails.

*I guess I'm just getting old.*

He followed the path down off the plateau and found himself walking thru the deserted town.

*Good, everyone is asleep. I won't run into anyone, and no one will be the wiser.*

Suddenly the two large huskies stepped in the pathway to bar his way. The hackles on their backs were raised and they bared their teeth in a nasty snarl.

*Go back to sleep mighty sentries, I am no danger to you and yours.*

The dogs sniffed Seth and whimpered once wagging their tails in acknowledgement and slowly went back into the jungle. The large gray wolf wasn't so easily turned away; he held his ground.

Seth knelt down and licked his hand and held out to the large animal. Sniffing it, the wolf stared into Seth's eyes. As if recognizing a fellow wild animal, it licked Seth's face and trotted off.

*Well, that certainly was strange.*

Seth made his way to the sandy beach and slowly removed his clothes. He entered the water and was surprised that it was so warm; it felt good on his aching body. He allowed himself to be taken by the current out a ways and then just floated in the warm water for about a half hour. He was enjoying the solitude when he suddenly heard a splash.

Alerted to the proximity of someone or thing, he scanned the moonlit water.

He smelled her before he saw her, a black outline against the night sky. He watched in silence as she made her way to a jetty. She was young, in her early twenties if that, he thought to himself. He took in a long deep breath, a rider! He watched as she climbed out of the water onto the jetty.

*Look at that body...umm... nice hips, long muscular legs, a small waist, and... ah, full breasts. She's a real beauty... and untouched!*

His senses told him all he needed to know.

He watched as she grabbed a towel and patted herself dry. As she reached for her clothes, the clouds parted and the moonlight hit her face shining brightly on it.

*Rebecca!*

Seth was taken aback; memories flooded his mind from long years past.

*Oh Rebecca!*

His loins burned with instant desire.

*No-no-no!*

He clenched his teeth; he knew he could go over there and have his way with her, but he fought the desire.



*No, not this time... He would keep himself in check this time.*

He continued to watch and thoughts of what he could do danced in his mind.

He began to fantasize about running his hands over her untouched naked body; he could almost feel her tremble...

Hannah felt a warm sensation suddenly wrap itself about her body and soar...

... kissing her neck from behind as he pressed himself close to her beautiful little ass...

She raised her hand to her neck turning her head in a slow sultry movement ...

... caressing those lovely breasts, bringing the nipples to erection...

Hannah arched her back slowly; cupping her breasts with her hands, leaning forward she felt a warm sensation start to curl its way up her back. She arched her back and rode the wave of pleasure and moaned breathlessly, "umm, oh yes..."

Seth heard her moan and realized what had happened. He caught himself and stopped before he got carried away.

The young woman seemed stunned for a moment; she looked about in embarrassment. She hesitantly stood up and dressed quickly, looking around all the time. When she was finished she looked about once more and left the jetty at a dead run.

*Whew! That was too close; I have to be much more careful, thought Seth guiltily.  
Oh it has been so long.*

When he was sure she was gone he left the water and dressed and made his way to the plateau. The White was waiting for him.

*Well it's good to see you showed some restraint, there is hope for you yet! Now get some sleep, we have a long day tomorrow.*

With that the White curled up and went back to sleep.

Seth did the same after imprinting the girl's face on his memory.

Half way across the other side of the world a great rumbling resounded in the earth.

Caves were broken apart; great mountains were leveled, massive boulders were tossed about.

Tectonic plates shifted all around the globe; great fissures were opened in the earth, and the 'sleeping one' stirred.

The morning brought a flurry of activity. The young girl awoke and through the gentle coaxing of Elizabeth she ate some food and drank some juice. Elizabeth was also able to replace her clothing. The child didn't talk too much except to say she had to go someplace. She had to find her friend and she must go quickly. Nigel explained to her the extent of her injuries and the necessity of her resting. She would hear none of it. In the end they had to arrange for Seth to come to her. When she saw him she remembered what had happened in the ravine, and she began to cry at the sight of his wounds. He gently calmed her and told her as soon as she was healed they would leave this place and bring her to her friend. She agreed to rest and get stronger.

Seth was taken by her innocence, staring into her sapphire blue eyes; he felt as tho he would do almost anything for her. He blinked and shook his head, reality returned in a flash.

Elizabeth was hidden in the next room while Seth was with the child. She was sorely tempted to look at this strange man. But her tie to her dragon, Lady Valeria, was very strong and if she said she was not to look, then she would obey her. After he had left the area Elizabeth asked Nigel why all the fuss about this strange man. Nigel told her to ask her dragon, or ask Valotin. Being strong minded, Elizabeth decided to ask Valotin directly.

She approached when he was alone on the ridge, he was aware of her interest.

*He has the ability to mesmerize women. He also has a great lust, and women have no self-control when near him. They will do anything and everything he asks.*

Valotin noted Elizabeth's look of doubt.

*You love James with all your heart, is this not so? Elizabeth nodded and Valotin continued. You wouldn't even think about him, Lady Elizabeth. All you would be able to think about was how to please Seth; and you would do so with great abandon. Until he chooses to control this lust, it is how it will remain for him. That is why the women are removed from his presence.*

*Oh Valotin, I did not realize, I had no idea. Please forgive me for being so obstinate.*

Elizabeth was feeling like a fool.

Valotin chuckled, *that is what I like about you the most, little one. You always question. Now go and find James and tell him how much you love him.*

Laughing, Elizabeth left Valotin and headed for the beach where she knew James was doing his exercises. James was quite surprised as Elizabeth ran down to him and began kissing him saying how much she loved him.

Hannah awoke with many questions running thru her mind. Something had happened last night, she was sure of it. She told her dragon all about what had happened down at the beach the night before and how she had liked the feeling and wanted more. She told her about the dream she had of a man; a man who seemed very familiar. She asked her if she knew what it could be. Her dragon then told her about the White and Seth. Hannah asked her dragon if he could have done this thing; if he could have been toying with her. Her dragon told her it was possible, if he was in the area. This did not sit well with Hannah, the more she thought of it, the madder she got. She decided to confront him. She headed up to the plateau unafraid; she knew instinctively that his supposed skills would have no effect on her.

Vail and James were there along with Valotin and Essex. They were so engrossed with their plans that they neither saw nor heard her coming. At the last possible second they were aware of her presence as she marched up to Seth and stared him in the eye.

Valotin raised up quickly, *Hannah? No!*  
Ichor flew to the plateau in alarm, *Hannah!*  
The White called to both dragons, *Wait and watch!*

Not hearing them, nor seeing them Hannah confronted Seth. Between clenched teeth she hissed at him, “Don’t you ever do that again!”

Seth stared at her with a leering grin on his face, using his green eyes he tried to calm her; but had no luck. She was totally unaffected by his power.

“I know it was you, so don’t deny it,” she wagged her finger at him. “Do not presume you are all that powerful sir! You wait to be asked, do you understand?” She then turned around and marched off the plateau.

Seth threw his head back and laughed heartily. “You have spirit rider!” he yelled as she left. *Whitey, she did not yield to my will. Could it be - do you think...?*

*What does your heart tell you?* The White asked and watched Seth’s reaction carefully.

*That I’ve just been given a chance... it feels right. Whitey, I’d just about given up hope; but if there is a chance to end this once and for all, I want a shot at it.*

He turned around and looked at the large White dragon.  
*I am not going to fail this time.*

*Perhaps, just maybe, this time you are right.* The White had waited centuries to hear this answer.  
*Remember your lessons from the past.*

A week later James and Adam stood on the plateau. James saw the golden hawk Isis coming his way. She flew to him and landed on his outstretched arm. She was keening and chirping excitedly. He turned to Adam and asked him to translate.

“She says that the messages are being delivered and the people understand. She says she saw signs of people everywhere. There are many left, they are hiding in well covered places.” Adam looked to the beautiful hawk and chuckled, “and she says that she saw bees! She’s very excited about that; it means that the plants and flowers will continue.”

“Good news at last! Please thank her for me and tell her she must rest. She has been going non-stop since we started to send the messages.” James was looking into her golden eyes as he spoke to Adam.

“She says not to worry, she knows her limits. She was planning to take a day off after this run anyway.” Isis chirped and flew off to the jungle and a well-deserved rest.

*James, Adam, your plan is working well. There are many more people than we thought. Valotin was calling to them from above. Isis had stopped first and spoken with Valotin, giving him the good news.*

*It was good planning on your part Adam, to warn the people in this manner. Valotin complimented him. For your information gentlemen, the Sleeping One’ has begun to stir. The White will take the child in a few days and set her on her path. Our ‘ghosts’ will be leaving also. Adam, you need to get with them and set up your retrieval system for their messages. Everything will be moving along quickly now.*

Adam left the plateau and headed for Lady Dee’s house, he knew Lee Chin would be there also. This was as good a time as any to begin their planning. As he was descending he saw Lee Chin step outside to greet him, and he hailed him.

“I am pleased to see you also Adam.” Lee Chin said with a chuckle. Both men went into the house and found Lady Dee waiting for them in the living room.

“Adam, how nice to see you again, Lee Chin and I have been scanning the area where the black bull will hold his court.” On a large table before her was set up a model of the area she spoke of. They had both been very busy modeling the various peaks and mountain ranges. “I believe that this is as close as we can get without being detected. We will have a clear view of the whole area.” Lady Dee smiled sweetly.

“You two are remarkable!” Adam said laughing as he inspected the model they had constructed. “We can use the black eagles here and here,” he said pointing to several peaks.

“If you get into a pinch where you think they may have discovered your lair, call to the buzzards with your minds. They will cover you and behave as if their territory and nests have been infringed. The black devils will be none the wiser.”

Adam now became serious, “if you should need quick extraction, send word by the eagles, we will try to cover your escape. All of the aerial life in the area has taken an oath to your dragons to keep watch over you. Call out with your minds and they will hear you. Your messages will be relayed and I will pick them up and take them to Valotin, myself.”

“We are humbled by your friends and their oaths of protection. Please thank them for us.” Lee Chin told Adam.

**“These particular friends have been taught telepathy. They understood from the beginning that there would be no going back once they learned; but they felt the cost was justified. They are no longer able to converse with their fellow birds. They will only be able to converse with each other and you two. You will be able to speak with them yourselves at any time. They asked only that they be allowed to live out their days here in this valley after the war is over. Valotin himself granted their request. I hope you both will approve.” Adam looked to them to see their reaction at this news.**

**Lady Dee stood and went to Adam taking his hand, “Oh Adam, of course they can. We would be honored to have them here. Their sacrifice is such a great one.”**

**“We have all made sacrifices Lady Dee; they felt that they must make some also. Each of these falcons, hawks, eagles and buzzards stepped forward and asked for this honor. They knew the risks and accepted them. It is rare that their kind have a chance to be part of an event as great as this one.” Adam told them. “You will both be well looked after, and on a good note, they will be able to warn you of any danger.”**

**“This news is very good, Adam.” Lee Chin began, “with their help we will have knowledge of every move the black bull makes. All this will greatly aid us in our task Adam.”**

**Lady Dee offered Adam some tea and he accepted. As she was pouring the tea she said quite casually, “Lee Chin and I will be leaving in the morning. We go to Dragon’s Hill for our final lessons from Jake. When finished there, we will head straight to our post and begin our mission.”**

**“No! I hadn’t realized that you would be leaving so soon.” Adam was going to miss these two, he had begun a real friendship with them, and even though he knew they would be watched over carefully he still worried for their safety.**

**Lee Chin came to Adam and put his hand on his shoulder, “Do not be concerned for us my winged friend. We are very good at what we do. Besides, we are in the service of One who will watch over us. Fear not for He will protect us with help from His varied creations.”**

**“Well said, Lee,” Lady Dee smiled at her paramour, “I for one am very confident that we will complete our task undetected.”**

**“I shall miss you both. I have enjoyed our talks, and your friendship. Gods speed to you both.” Adam said his good-byes and left them to their packing.**

**Adam took to the air and headed towards Emily’s house. As he went along he began to think about the coming battles that would be fought. He could no longer hide his concern for Emily’s safety. He had watched many times as the riders and dragons had trained and one thing was very clear to him. They fought in pairs. Emily did not have a dragon rider as a mate. She always fought close to a pair, offering cover and extra power when needed. But she fought alone. He had mentioned this to her once and they had argued about it. It was one of the few times that they had ever argued about anything. She was adamant that she would be okay. Adam wasn’t so sure. As he flew along he suddenly changed direction. He had made a decision, one he hoped that he would not regret. He headed towards the high plateau looking for Seth and the White. He saw Seth sitting on the high mound watching the town below. Seeing him approach Seth stood. Adam landed and started to walk over to him.**

“Hey there birdman, what’s up?” Seth called to him. Seeing the serious look on his face he asked, “Adam, is anything wrong?”

Adam looked at Seth and hoped that he wouldn’t regret what he was about to do. “Yes Seth there is, and I’m hoping that you can help me.”

“What could I possibly do for you?” Seth asked him not understanding.

“My mate rides a dragon, I do not,” Adam looked imploringly at Seth. “I’ve watched them in their training, they fight in pairs...” The anguish ripping Adam apart was evident to Seth; he knew what he was feeling.

“Adam, it doesn’t work that way,” he began.

“I know you can’t single her out,” Adam said quickly, “but ... Seth, she’s the only good thing that happened to me since this nightmare started.”

“Adam, listen to me,” Seth put his hand on Adam’s shoulder, “your Lady will be under the protection of Valotin himself. Do you really think he would train her and then abandon her? I assure you, she will be safe.” Seth saw the White rise up behind Adam and look at him in surprise.

“Now maybe you can help me with something. I have a picture of a particular person in my mind that I would like to put a name to.” Adam looked questioningly at Seth.

“Look into my eyes my friend, and see of whom I speak.” Seth’s voice was mesmerizing as he spoke, almost like a keen similar to the dragons. Adam stared into Seth eyes and he suddenly saw the shape of a woman take form. She stood and turned in his direction; her face became clear. Recognition showed on Adam’s face.

Adam turned away from Seth and shook his head.

“Whew! That is powerful stuff!”

Adam wondered what Seth was up to, why he wanted this information, but he trusted him.

“Her name is Hannah; she flies with Ichor’s group. She’s fiercely independent and a little headstrong; but she’s a good fighter. Why do you ask?”

“I happened to see her a few days ago; she reminds me of someone I once knew a long time ago.” Seth answered in a low voice. “Now you’d better get going or your friends will think that I am corrupting you.”

Adam extended his hand and shook Seth’s. “I wish you well in your fight.” They stared into each other’s eyes for a moment, both wishing for a different time and a longer friendship. The moment passed and Adam took to the sky and headed towards Emily’s.

Seth watched him fly away. *What have you been up to Seth? The White was now very interested in what Seth had in his mind. You know we cannot interfere with what is to be. Others will protect the woman he cares for. Now, what about this other woman?*

*She is the one who came to the plateau, Whitey. Didn’t you notice how much she resembled Rebecca? I just wanted to know who she was.* Seth looked at the White and added quickly, *don’t worry; I’m not going to do anything.*

The White took in a deep breath and looked at his rider, *you had better not. Hey Whitey..* Seth motion with his hands.

The White frowned at Seth and continued. *We have enough to do as it is; we do not need any of your distractions to get in the way. The child is well enough for us to help her on her way. We leave in the morning.*

*So it begins again.* Seth said sadly looking out towards the bay. He took a long breath and let it out slowly. *Well, I'm here for you old friend. I won't let you down.*

The night was a restless one for Seth. He finally decided to walk down to the water and swim for a bit to work off all the excess energy he was feeling. As he approached he saw the woman sitting on a boulder overlooking the bay. He silently came up behind her and sat there, watching her for a time.

“Well?” She broke the silence, “Are you going to say something?” Her voice sounded scared and defiant at the same time.

“I have no intention of harming you, woman.” Seth assured her quickly. “I just want to talk; it has been a long time since I spoke to a woman who was not afraid of me. And you don't seem to be afraid of anything.”

“I've heard all the stories about you,” Hannah answered softly, still looking out over the bay. She shifted her position and raised her leg leaning on it. “For some reason, they don't ring true to me. There's something else going on; I can feel it.”

“You might be getting into something you should not.” Seth marveled that she could pick up on the truth of it all. “Ahaa... I shouldn't be here, no good can come of this,” he added as he stood up and turned to leave.

“You can't run away all time.” Hannah softly added, “Sometimes,” she slowly turned around, “the only way to end something – is to face it.”

The moon behind her gave her an ethereal appearance, and Seth felt as if he were speaking to Rebecca once again. He was the one who was mesmerized this time; she showed no fear as she looked into Seth's eyes and smiled.

“The next move is up to you,” she purred softly.

He wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her so badly; but he remembered all the mistakes of his past and what they lead to. No, he would not touch her. Instead he sat down and began to speak of many things from his past. She listened quietly and made no comment. When he was finished she looked at him with a single tear sliding down her cheek. Not a look of horror, or disgust, but one of deep concern.

“I am so sorry for you, Seth.” She raised her hand and put it on his arm saying, “I wish I could help you in some way, but I fear this something only you can end.”

He was taken aback, totally unprepared for her reaction. He stood and thanked her for listening. He wanted to hold her so bad that he ached. Instead, he fled to the safety of the plateau, and the company of the White.

*Restraint at last!* Mused the White to himself; *perhaps this time we will end it!*

Early the next morning the child was brought to the high plateau. As she stepped onto the plateau she saw the White and Seth waiting for her. She immediately ran to the White and threw her little arms around his lowered head.

*Thank you; thank you so much for saving me. Are we to go to my friend now? He is restless and we must hurry.* She let go of the White and ran to Seth.

*“Oh we must hurry or he will think I have abandoned him.”*

*Easy little one, calm yourself.* The White told her, *we will leave shortly; Seth, gather your things, I will make our goodbyes to Valotin.*

Seth gathered his things and casually looked to the skies to see if Adam was about. He placed his things on the White and turned, there was Adam standing not two feet from him.

*“You didn’t think I would let you go without saying good bye, did you?”* He said smiling. Both men stared at each other for some seconds and then embraced as brothers, each feeling a closeness that they could not explain.

The gesture was not lost on James. He could see the strong bond that had formed between the two men. *Most unusual* he thought to himself. He watched as they shook hands and Seth climbed onto the White.

Adam lifted the child and handed her up to him. Seth sat her behind him and instructed her to hold on to him. With a wave of his hand, they took to the sky. Adam took off also and flew with them to the heights. He stayed there and watched as they flew upward to the thermal currents and were whisked away.

Adam returned slowly to the plateau and went directly to Valotin. He was in great turmoil. *Valotin, I feel as if I have lost a brother, I cannot explain it. I don’t want him to die!*

*Do not concern yourself with undue worry Adam. This time around there is hope for Seth. If all goes as planned he will be given a choice; what he does with it will decide his fate. There are greater forces at work here than you or I are privy to.* Valotin rose up and looked off into the distance. *They have exited the thermals, the child feels her friend near.*

Valotin turned and spoke directly to Adam. *Adam, when we leave for battle, I am going to ask you to remain here. I want you to keep watch over this area and the people we leave here. There will be two dragons staying behind to protect this place in case the black bull sends some of his minions here.*

*And Emily, Valotin, will she be safe?* Adam decided to unburden himself and told Valotin the truth of his concern for Emily. *I have been beside myself with worry. She assures me that she is very capable, but this is a fight to the death. I could lose her; I don’t think I could take that Valotin.*

*Lady Emily will not be hurt, nor will she die Adam.* Speaking with complete confidence and a reassuring tone in his voice, Valotin put Adam at ease. *Believe me you worry needlessly.*



*Thank you Valotin, I trust you, and if you say she will be safe, then that's good enough for me.*  
Adam had come to trust Valotin, and respected him as a leader. He had pledged himself to Valotin's cause. *I appreciate your understanding my worry.*

Adam left the plateau and went to the Bay for his morning swim with the dragons. He had formed a strong bond with Emily's dragon, Lady Arian, and she looked forward to seeing him each morning.

*Is your mind at ease now Adam? Do you finally believe that Lady Emily and I will come to no harm?*  
She raised her head and puffed up and sent a shower of water in Adam's direction.  
*Come Adam, let us fly together.*

# RETRIBUTION

Half a continent away a cold chill played its way across a mountainous valley. It seeped into every nook and cranny blanketing the floor of the great valley in its nightly promenade. Huge swirling clouds filled the night sky, ever changing shape and size; massive formations coming together, only to break apart into small clusters. As these enormous clouds parted once again a moonbeam shot across the mountain highlighting the valley below. All was still and clear for a moment in time. Suddenly, as if listening to a train approach from a long distance, the ground began to tremble. Great rumblings could be heard deep, deep within the earth, seemingly getting closer and closer. Huge buzzards living on the top of the giant took to the air in a flurry. Gazing down the mountainside they took in all the signs. From the very crest of the mountain small pebbles began their long slide down from the heights, like a skier out of control. These small ones gradually loosened the earth enough that larger stones joined them and began their journey downward. Faster and faster they cascaded down; larger and larger stones joined the parade until great boulders began to shake loose and overtake them. A deep throaty roar began to fill the valley until it drowned out all else. Down below game scattered and ran for their lives. They knew what was happening. They had all heard this sound before; and they knew that death followed it.

The great buzzards flew high and banded in a circle as if conferring; one lone giant took off and flew high to the thermals, waiting before it headed west. The rest scattered in a loose formation and circled, keeping a watchful eye on the happenings below. Excitement flew with them, as they knew that their task was about to begin.

A loud drawn out scraping sound could be heard; almost like chalk on a blackboard, high-pitched and nerve racking. Closer and closer it crept to the surface bringing with it a sense of anxiety and desperation. Suddenly, in an explosion of rock and earth the great bull broke thru and vaulted into the air screeching and roaring his rage.

*Free! At last I am free of this dungeon!*

Eight black dragons of various sizes exploded from the opening behind him.

*I hunger...*

Turning his eyes on his minions he selected the smallest and went for him quickly ripping it to shreds and devouring it. The others were too frightened to run; they knew from past experience that if they did, their master would be upon them quickly.

The great black bull took his bearings and immediately flew down the long valley to another mountainside. There he began to dig at a frantic pace starting a tunnel into the side of the mountain. Calling his minions he instructed them to continue the digging as he flew above and took in a long breath of the chilled air. Raising his head he breathed in thru his nose and let his senses dissect the various smells.

*Three Ancients! So they think they can outwit me... ah, and the White also!*

He took in another huge lungful of air and waited.

*Seth! Ha, ha, ha... Seth too? No matter, this time I will show them that they are dealing with their own doom.*

Loud roaring brought him back to the task at hand. They had broken thru and ten more dragons filled the air. They circled and paid him their respects for their deliverance. Again he headed down the mountainous valley freeing another group of his minions. By morning's light he had freed 120 dragons, but there were still more. He divided his forces and sent them to free his remaining dragons.

A lone buzzard dived out of the thermals and headed straight for the large plateau. Keening loudly it circled Valotin and Ichor. Hearing the loud call Adam flew to the plateau and begged the great bird to land. Gliding to a perch on a large boulder the majestic buzzard landed and bowed to Valotin and quickly turning he gave his message to Adam.

*The black bull has emerged from his cave; he dug his way out and is now freeing his minions. On a side note, he attacked and ate one of his own. She says her flock is keeping an eye on him from the heights. He is headed in the direction where there is a cave of people hiding. They believe he is going to feed his minions with these innocents.*

Adam thanked the great bird and offered her a resting place after her long journey. She thanked him for his courtesy but said no, she must return quickly to her flock. He assured her that she was no good to her flock tired and weak. Upon thought she agreed with his wisdom and accepted his offer.

Valotin thought for a several moments, turning to Adam he asked, *your friends know what the bull knows, correct?* Adam nodded assent. *So it stands to reason that he knew those people were hiding in that particular cave. Is it possible that he knows of others?*

Adam asked the tired buzzard if this was possible. She replied that that was the only vision of people she could see in his mind. She rose up and spread her wings, turning around she lowered her head and said; *you cannot help these people. By the time you gather your forces and get to the area, they will all be dead anyway, and the black will be gone. There has been a smell of death about that mountain for many months, now we know why.*

Three days earlier the White had been traveling the thermals with the child looking for her 'friend'. They were now close to the same valley that housed the black bull. Suddenly the young girl began to shout,

"Here, here... no, no, go back, go back. Yes! Here! Hurry, hurry he waits for me!"

The White shot out of the thermal and descended in a spiral above a mountain range. It was desolate and barren of even vegetation.

"Are you sure little one?" Seth asked looking about.

"Yes, yes! This is it... hurry!" She was breathless and very agitated, almost leaping off the White in her excitement to get on the ground.

As he landed on the side of the mountain she scrambled off with Seth's help and began to run. Suddenly she stopped and turned around looking at Seth and the White. Black curls circled her shining face; her eyes were dancing with brilliant blue hues as she ran back to them.

She threw her little arms around Seth's neck hugging him and whispering, "...thank-you Seth, it will be ok, and so will you!"

She went to the White and hugged his large lowered head; *we both know the plan from here on in, Whitey. But this time, this time will be different.*

She took a step back, lowered her head and when she raised it her eyes were shining brightly as she said in a trancelike state,  
“In three days time return here with Ichor and all his forces; they will be sorely needed.” She turned and ran off shouting, “do not fail me!”

The White took off and headed back to the thermals. *Shouldn't we stay to make sure she is okay? Seth asked his friend, I mean come on Whitey, she's such a little thing, and she could get hurt.*

*No Seth, it is not permitted. She will be just fine; the great leviathan already knows she is near. Look below before we enter the thermals and you will see.*

Seth looked below and it seemed as though the mountain range was a living thing, moving in a snakelike motion, and then they were swept away by the Thermal and the vision was lost.

The child clawed her way around the mountain till she saw the opening she knew was there. She squeezed through and entered a small cave. Following her instincts she moved forward and found the hole in the rocky floor of the cave. Without hesitation she jumped into the hole and slid down for about thirty feet. It deposited her into a gigantic cavern. She rose and dusted herself off looking about. She immediately began to climb to a point above her. She looked above and found the spot she wanted. She climbed onto a large outcropping of rock, a huge boulder wedged into the side of the great cavern. She reached up and tugged at a small pebble in the side of the cavern wall. Wrenching it free she watched. The surrounding area had been held in place by the small pebble and now that it was free it began to adjust itself. A few pebbles, then rocks began to fall. A small opening was revealed and light began to fill the cavern. She scrambled down the rocks quickly to the cavern floor. A beam of sunlight penetrated the cavern and slowly made its way down and across the floor highlighting the small child as she stood waiting.

A deep loud rumbling could be heard as the floor of the cavern gave way and slowly a behemoth began to rise. Thirty, forty, fifty feet of massive muscle propelled it along. It rose out of the depths and grunted with a deep resonating sound. The small girl giggled. As the sound reached the huge monster, it turned its head and looked down. Below him stood the child, bathed in sunlight. He lowered his massive body and laid his head close to her feet.  
*Enaj has returned to you young one, it bellowed.*

Without hesitating the young child went to it and laid her body across its massive head. *I am here my mighty friend; she said as she rubbed the creature's head gently, I am here!*

*Aaahhh, was his deep booming reply; it has been too long...*

The girl climbed up onto the giant lying on its back just behind its massive head.  
*Well come on, we have a lot of work to do.*

The leviathan began to turn his huge body and burrow back from where he came. As he traveled along he listened to the young girl's instructions and followed them without question.

Three days later as James, Valotin, Adam and Ichor stood on the high plateau discussing what the large buzzard and several of the falcons had told them. Suddenly the White exploded from the thermals and rushed to the plateau below.

*Valotin, we bring news of great urgency. May we land?* The White shouted to those below. Giving assent they watched as the large dragon landed and Seth jumped down. The White gave greetings and continued quickly.

*Ichor, I am glad you are here. The child gave us a message. We are to return in three days to the exact spot we left her and we are to bring Ichor and all his forces with him. She said nothing else except not to fail her. We have been occupied until now so we came straight away. Today is the third day Valotin. We must leave immediately.*

Ichor looked to Valotin, *if she asks this then it must be important. I cannot refuse a request made by the child in Enaj's name. We all know that they are linked as one.*

*You are correct Ichor; Valotin called James to his side, marshal your forces.*

A call went out to all the riders from Ichor's Clan to report to the plateau. Ichor called to all his dragons to return quickly. Instructions were given as the force was assembled and soon dragons and riders were airborne.

*God's speed my friends,* called Valotin as they departed.

Valotin asked James to ready an area to receive at least 200 people. *I believe that Enaj and the child are going to attempt to save the people that the black bull wishes to feast upon. If they succeed, Ichor and his dragons will be ferrying them here. Think James, where can we hide 200 people quickly.*

James thought for a moment, in the back of his mind he knew there was something he heard Elliott say when they had first arrived. *The natives! Of course, Valotin - the natives can hide them all and there will be no trace that they were ever here. The jungle canopy will cover their trail and no one will be the wiser.*

*Excellent thinking James, get your people ready and prepare for their arrival.*

Valotin now turned in the direction of the native village and sent a message to the Shaman asking for his help. Within 30 minutes the little Shaman arrived and asked what service he could do for the Mighty One. Valotin explained the situation to him and also told him the possible dangers.

The little Shaman laughed and said that the black devils would have to find him first.

*Yes, yes I can hide the people within the jungle. There are many places within several of the great temples themselves that lead down to secret cities. That is where I took my people when the first burning began many years ago. Perhaps that was why they were built in the first place. I had planned on taking my people there when you all leave for the great battle. I am honored that you asked for my help, Mighty One; I will not let you down.*

*My friend, Valotin said softly, will you climb on my back and show me where this place is, so that I can instruct my dragons to keep watch on it for your safety. My rider comes now.*

James returned to the plateau and climbed onto Valotin showing the Shaman where to step. Once aboard they took to the air.

**The little man was awed by the flight and filled with great excitement. As they neared Machu Picchu he instructed them further into the surrounding jungle. He pointed to a mound below in a small clearing and told them that that was the entrance to the underground city. Valotin imprinted it on his mind and they returned to the plateau.**

**Once on the ground Valotin asked if the Shaman needed any help getting supplies to the site and offered his dragons to help. The Shaman told him that he had been stocking the hideout for some time knowing that they would need it soon. He did request that some large barrels of water be brought to the site, as there would be need of it with all the extra people. It was done within the hour. The little Shaman thanked Valotin for the singular honor of allowing him to ride upon his back. Valotin told him he would call him when the people arrived. The Shaman took his leave and returned to his village. He marshaled his people together explaining what was needed of them. The women and children began to assemble large baskets of fruit and berries. They were then loaded on the backs of the many donkeys they had and taken to the hidden city.**

Two days earlier deep in a large cave a weary man was bent over with his ear to the ground. Something was coming their way; he could feel the rocky earth reverberate with sounds he was hearing. It was getting louder, and closer. “Shh, all of you be quiet.” He listened again, fear beginning to build. *God, please help me to keep these people from bolting.*

“Wilhelm, what do you hear? Is it like in the dream?” asked his wife, Katrina. She was wild-eyed and frightened half out of her mind. He knew they all were scared to the point of running. He had to quiet them again, calm them down before they panicked.

“Listen, all of you. The dreams said a child would emerge from the ground and lead us to safety. It has not changed in any way in all the months since it started to come. I believe the dream; I think it is coming from God. Did He not warn us to get to the cave quickly before the burning ones came? Did we not find water here? Have we not been safe since He told us to stock supplies in the cave?” He put his arm around his wife’s shoulder drawing her close to him. “Do not doubt now. We have not come all this way for nothing. He will not abandon us.”

The ground began to vibrate; loud screams escaped from the mouths of several of the women. Small rocks and pebbles began to bounce up and down across the rocky floor of the large cavern. A deep thudding noise began to fill the cavern, the people pulled back in fear as the ground began to fall away beneath them.

“No! Do not run! This is just as the dream showed me. Stand firm and we will be saved,” he told them firmly, silently hoping he was doing the right thing.

The floor gave way and then there was silence. They all waited in fear and hope. They could see movement deep inside the dark gapping hole; something was coming their way. A small child climbed out of the hole. She stood there and looked about the cavern at all the faces. When she saw the man she smiled and began to walk towards him. He slowly started to make his way to her, tears streaming down his face.

“It ...it was true, you ...you have come for us,” he stuttered.

She spoke softly, and yet each man, woman, and child heard her as if she were speaking directly to them.

“Yes, I’m here to lead you away from the Black Death that approaches. My friend and I are going to take you somewhere safe. Once we reach it, there will be many dragons and riders to take you to safety. You received the news from the birds did you not?” They all nodded, “then you all know of the Dragons of Light who fight for you. My friend and I do the same. Now you must not be afraid of his great size; he is very good and will see that no harm comes to you. Will you come with me?” She looked about the cavern at the frightened faces of the people. “You must trust me if you want to live; we cannot delay any longer if we are to get away in time. The black devil is on his way here, even now as we speak.”

The large man seemed to have recovered himself, and now he turned to his people. “Well, what are you waiting for? Get moving if you want to live.”



That seemed to be all the encouragement they needed as everyone climbed down onto the cavern floor and encircled the young girl. She led them all to a stand of large boulders and urged them to climb up onto it, using it as a platform of sorts.

“My friend is going to come out of his hole now and turn around so that we may begin our journey. Remember, do not be afraid of his size, he is really very gentle. Once he turns around, he will pass by you. I want you climb onto his back and lay flat, two by two, side by side. Do you understand?”

Heads nodded in assent. The young girl then turned and faced the gaping hole. Calling with her mind she addressed her massive friend.

*They are ready Enaj. You can come out now. Be prepared for some screams, this group is very frightened. I shall do my best to calm them.*

There were loud gasps as the head of the leviathan came out into the open. The huge body took several minutes to come completely out of the great hole. There was a strong smell of urine in the air as many of the children and a few of the adults lost control of their bladders at the sight of this behemoth. Not entirely an unexpected event. But there were no screams. The greater part of the group watched in fascination as the great beast slowly turned and began to head back towards the gaping hole.

“Everybody watch me,” the child shouted as she jumped on just behind the great leviathan’s head, “you do it like this,” she laid flat, arms extended.

The man called Wilhelm stepped forward and took his wife’s hand. Nodding at each other they jumped and did just as the child had done. The man raised his head and waved to the others, urging them to do likewise. They followed him quickly, many adults taking a child with them. Soon all of the 176 people that had hidden all winter long in hopes of finding salvation were on the great beasts’ back leaving the cave empty.

As they entered the blackness of the earth, they heard the child’s voice speaking in their minds, soft and soothing. *Lay your heads down and close your eyes. Hear only the soft sounds of the earth. Prepare yourselves for a short bump; we must close the way we left so the devils cannot find us. There was a small lurch and a rumbling sound from far away. There, that wasn’t so bad now was it? Rest now, just close your eyes and rest and enjoy the ride. Sleep and rest, you are safe now.* The soft singsong effect of her voice and the gentle rolling of the leviathan lulled them into a deep sleep quickly.

Two hundred miles and 2 days later, thirty-two dragons broke out of the thermals and hovered there. After conferring with Ichor, the White spiraled down a bit and looked over the land.

*No movement, nothing. This is the exact place where we left her, Ichor. I guess now we wait and see if she was successful.*

As the White returned to the heights Seth could not help but notice that Hannah rode to the left of Ichor.

Twenty-five long minutes later the White noticed a slight movement below.

*Seth, look below and tell me if you see anything.*

Seth searched the mountain range below. He scanned carefully and then he saw it. It was the same snake-like movement just under the surface that he saw before.

*There, he said, pointing to a large ridge, he surfaces!*

The White called to Ichor, *they are coming Ichor. Look below to the ridge and you will see the movement of Enaj below the surface.*

**Ichor slowly spiraled down to the White and Seth. Sarah leaned over and searched the mountain range below.**

***Look there, she shouted excitedly, pointing, I can see the movement.***

***Yes Sarah, I see it now. Turning to his rider Ichor continued, you are about to see what no human has ever seen and remembered. The great one, Enaj comes to the surface. Juztin and Lady Jessica, I need you to scout ahead and behind. Look to see if any of the black vermin are in the area. Stay to the heights so they will not see you. Take no action if you see anything; just report back to me. The rest of you stay in the heights till we call.***

**The mountain below seemed to come alive and move on its own. Great ridges moved in an undulating motion, wave after wave cascaded across the huge mountain. Then suddenly all movement stopped. Those above waited for the emergence of the great leviathan. Slowly at first and then with more gusto great mounds of earth began to fall away as the great beast emerged. Sarah gave an audible gasp as the huge beast came into view.**

**“Good God in heaven!” she said before she could stop herself.**

**Seth answered her with a loud chuckle. “Big isn’t he? You don’t know the half of it pretty lady. He could swallow us with one gulp before we could even turn around to run.” He waited for her reaction, but she gave him none. She knew her place as Ichor’s rider and she wasn’t about to bait this one.**

**The White descended to the plateau when he saw the child wave to him. Ichor followed at a respectable distance. Seth jumped down and waited for the child. All eyes watched as the child went to her knees and bent over and planted a kiss on the head of the huge behemoth. A loud deep rumble could be heard all the way to the heights.**

***He calls you all to come, the child called to Ichor. Hurry, hurry, the black will be digging into the cavern by now. We have no time to lose.***

**As they watched from above the riders saw the people begin to rise up and look about them in surprise; they seemed to be in some kind of a stupor. They were all quite dirty, covered with soil, but otherwise unharmed. Ichor signaled and his people began their descent to the ridge. Ichor received permission to speak to the townspeople and explained their situation and what was required of them. They agreed to do whatever he asked when they learned that the black devil would find their cavern empty shortly.**

**Ichor’s riders and dragons landed two by two. Seth led each group to the waiting dragons and helped load them. Each dragon took as many people as they could hold. They assembled in the heights and waited for their brothers. Ichor recalled Juztin and Lady Jessica and loaded them up also.**

**The White took the last five of them on his back and thanked Enaj for his selfless act in saving these people. He received a deep rumbling chuckle in reply. The White took off and was heading to the heights with Ichor just behind him when they heard a familiar sound.**

**Two of the black devils had come around the ridge screeching and howling loudly. They spotted Ichor and went straight for him never even looking below to see what was waiting there.**

Ichor realized that he could not turn and fight as he was laden with innocent people; instead he tried to gain more speed and height before they could reach him. Several of the women on his back panicked and began screaming. Sarah had her hands full trying to calm them. Calculating the situation, the White made a decision and broke away and turned to face the vermin. He had only five on his back and they were men; he counted on them having some courage.

“Hold on tight,” Seth shouted back to them, “this could get ugly!” He reached down and pulled out his Staff of Fire.

From below the huge leviathan saw what was happening and reacted quickly by suddenly rising out of its hole. It launched itself upward with such speed that it barely had time to register on those above before he was gone again. During those seconds a few above saw it rise upward at a frightening pace. It’s huge gaping mouth open; it engulfed the two fliers and returned to its hole just as quickly. Many could not believe what they had just seen.

The White barked a command loudly, *to the thermals, now!* Everyone moved quickly and they were soon swept away.

Down below, the little girl chuckled, *see!* She said sweetly in her singsong voice, *didn’t I promise you a treat? Now aren’t you glad we saved those people.*

A deep resonating purring sound could be heard coming from under the mountain.

Two hundred miles away a group of buzzards circled lazily above a large mountain. Rising up to them from below were echoed loud sounds of screeching; and roars of rage could be heard coming from inside a large empty cavern.

Dragons began flying out of the cave in a great rush.

The black bull was livid. *Empty!* (he screamed and shrieked) *Empty! Aarrgh...!*

In a fit of absolute unbridled rage the black bull tore into three minions closest to him and ripped them to shreds. The others fled quickly in fear and panic; his rage was so great.

Ichor’s dragons came out of the thermals and began their descent to the plateau. As the people looked below to their new home they were thrilled at the sight of the lush green canopy of the jungle. It had been a very long time since they had seen anything so beautiful, that many wept out of sheer joy. Ichor landed his band on the large plateau where they were greeted with beautiful songs by the many birds living here. The people dismounted and stood about in a group listening to the beautiful sounds filling the air. Many turned and hugged the person nearest them out of joy and relief.

The White landed and discharged its passengers and took off quickly. Unnoticed by anyone below, there was a short acknowledgement between Lady Vesta and the White as he passed overhead. It was very subtle, just a quick eye contact and a smile from within.

The large man that James had assumed was their leader came forward with a small woman hanging onto his arm. He introduced himself and thanked all the riders and dragons for their deliverance from almost certain death. He was obviously overcome by all that had happened. James and Elizabeth introduced themselves and tried to put the man at ease. After explanations were given, the entire group was led below to the town where they were all given food and water.

Most of them requested to be allowed to bathe, as they were all covered in dirt and grime. They were directed to the nearby waterfall and new clothes were provided thanks to the foresight of a quick trip to the warehouse in Rio. Fed and now cleaned, the tired and wary groups were led to the now empty hatching grounds where cots had been set up. It didn't take long for them to lie down on the beckoning pillows and fall asleep.

James and Elizabeth reported to Valotin that the weary townsfolk were in the hatching grounds sound asleep. Valotin thanked his friend for his thoughtfulness and care of the poor bewildered people. He then informed James that they would all soon forget how they had left their cave; they would only remember the dragons coming to save them. It was the way Enaj dealt with humans - no memory of his passing. Then he suggested that James and Elizabeth get some rest too.

*As everyone slept, Valotin and Ichor conferred on the day's events. I have to say truthfully Valotin, never before have I ever seen such a sight. Enaj is indeed a wonder to behold. And to think that the power that controls such a force lies in the hands of a small child*

*Valotin turned to his friend; there is much wisdom in that small child my friend. She and the great beast are as one. His knowledge is now at her disposal. They now go to the Pacific. Along the way he will develop flippers, and then claws and wings. It will be the Enaj from the past that emerges into the Pacific Ocean. Valotin raised his head and stared at the stars above, once he rids it of the vermin swimming in it now, he will head back to the land and aid Wolf of the Blue Dragon Clan with the deliverance of Japan. Chuckling he added, I would truly like to be there to see what happens when Enaj meets the Blues, let alone Diana! Both dragons looked at each other and chuckled loudly at the thought.*

*The One who directs us all knows well what His creations can do, Ichor replied. But you are right; it would be a sight to see when they first meet. That is probably why a child leads him; she and Diana will recognize each other as kindred spirits.*

While Ichor and Valotin were chuckling above, Seth was below in Dragons Bay with the White. Since everyone was asleep, they saw no reason not to enjoy a good bath. Seth had gone down to the Bay and removed his clothing and left them on the rocky jetty. He had waded into the water and began scrubbing himself when his friend called to him.

*I could use some help here Seth. Something has burrowed under my skin by my left back wing shoulder bone. Can you scrub it out? It has become very annoying!* The White ducked under the water and surfaced again.

Seth swam out to his friend, *all right, hold still old man, allow me see what I can do.* He found the area quickly and began to scrub it vigorously; a thorn was imbedded deep in the White's hide.

*Aaahhh... yes!* Purred the White.

It was a rare that the White allowed himself such a delicacy. Seth knew how much he enjoyed it, so he scrubbed even harder. The thorn was loosened and finally scrubbed away.

*Ummm ... ah..ah...* sighed the White.

After another five minutes the White thanked his friend and rinsed himself off. Floating for a bit they went over the day's events; then saying his good nights, the White headed to the top plateau.

Seth floated in the Bay feeling his aches and pains dissolve in the warm water. He was in no hurry to return to the plateau. As he floated he began to go over the events of the day. He felt her presence at the same time he spotted her walking over to the jetty.

*What is it with her always showing up when I am here?*

She dove into the water, surfaced, and began to swim towards him. She dove under the water and came up with a large conch shell in her hands. He slipped underwater and headed for her. He shot out of the water with the girl held tight in his arms; she was slapping him and shouting.

"Let me go," Hannah yelled pushing him away. "What is it with you?" She pushed him again, "I was here first, and before I could say anything you guys marched right in like you owned the place." She took another deep breath and continued, "I didn't interfere with you and your friend, I expect the same treatment."

"I'm sorry if I scared you," Seth said softly as he let her go and moved away. The feel of her skin next to his was overpowering. He began to back up, and then forcefully shouted at her, "You should be back at your quarters anyway. All the riders are supposed to be in their quarters!"

"Don't bark orders at me." She quickly answered him defiantly; "I'm not one of your mindless bimbo's who pant around you like a dog in heat."

He started to laugh which seemed to infuriate her more; he was taken with her defiance.

"Whoa, you have spirit girl; I'll give you that," now he changed his tone and used the 'voice', "but you don't know what you're dealing with." He tried to give her his best sneer, "now move your cute little ass and get!"

Ignoring him she continued, "Why do you pretend to be this cold scary bastard?" Hannah took a step in his direction.

**“You hide behind caustic words and those devilish eyes of yours.”  
She took another step and the water suddenly lost its warmth for him.**

**“But I think you would welcome a real relationship; the warmth of a real love.”  
Another step closer and he began to take in her scent.**

**“You’re afraid to get close to anybody, aren’t you?”  
Another step and now he could feel the heat coming from her body.**

**“Stop,” Seth took a step backwards, “you truly don’t understand.”**

**“Oh I think I understand all too well,” she said seductively.**

**Seth didn’t want to hurt this woman, for some reason he wanted to remain on her good side.  
“Heed the orders of Valotin and get out of here now!”**

**She stopped and stared at him for a moment.  
“Oh my goodness,” the wrong conclusion dawned on Hannah, “you’re afraid of ... me?”**

**She moved forward again grinning; he found her teasing extremely intoxicating.  
“What harm could I possibly do to the great Seth?”**

**Another step forward and Seth now ran out of room; the rocky jetty was pressing against his back.  
“You don’t know what you’re doing,” he pleaded with her thru tightly clenched teeth.**

**Hannah stepped closer and he could feel her body just inches from his.  
“What could the great Seth be afraid of...” she said teasingly.**

**He felt himself start to come alive.  
*No! Please God... no! I don't want to hurt her...***

**She was laughing when she suddenly saw the shift in his eyes.  
False bravado urged her on, “you don’t scare me,” she reached out to touch his arm.**

**In one blindingly swift movement Seth lashed out, spun her around, stripped the suit from her body  
and pulled her to him bending her arms behind her back forcing her to press herself against his body.  
*Oh God!***

**With his other hand he quickly grabbed a handful of hair and pulled her head back. Pinning her in  
place with his now fully alive body, he kissed her. He lost all reason for a moment as he pressed  
himself on her; the feel of her skin next to his was overwhelming. The smell of her fear was  
intoxicating driving him on.**

**Only now did Hannah realize her mistake as she felt his heated body against hers. She could feel just  
how alive he was as he was pressed between her legs. She also felt a burning sensation between her  
legs begin to snake its way up her spine. She realized that if she did not act quickly, she wouldn’t be  
able to - because she liked this feeling.**

**Taking in a deep breath he smelled her fear and his eyes flashed as he looked down at her frightened  
face; and the memories began to rush in. It excited him even more. As he kissed her again she  
moaned, and he felt her relax a bit. Thinking she was under his spell he eased his hold on her and  
began to kiss her neck.**

It was then that she managed to wiggle her arms loose. She quickly got them between his body and hers and pushed as hard as she could against his chest.

“No!” she hissed at him, “not like this... ”

She stared into his eyes defiantly showing no effect of his ability.

“When we come together it will not be like this; do you hear me? Now, release me,” she demanded in a cold deep voice.

He released her and stepped back, he could see that she was scared, but she held her ground.

*I truly didn't have any effect on her...?*

“I warned you silly girl; everyone warned you about me,” Seth hissed. “You’re playing with fire and you could get burnt badly!”

“No, I don’t think so,” she said softly, “I think there is more to you than anyone realizes.”

She tilted her head slightly and looked at him with innocent eyes, a half smile on her face; a small action that had a profound effect on him.

“I can see it in your eyes even now.” She taunted him further, “I saw it when you kissed me; a sad yearning for something more.”

She caught him off guard with the truth and he lashed out at her, “You see nothing but the dreams of a young girl for romance and excitement,” he said angrily. “Get out of here before I fuck your brains out!”

Seth could still feel how her body felt pressed to his; so inviting. He had to get away from her or he wouldn’t be able to control himself. He quickly turned away and froze to the spot.

“Jesus!” he hissed.

In the distance a black dragon was headed their way, about a 100 feet above the ocean.

“Freeze girl, don’t move an inch,” he said in a voice that chilled her to the bone. “There’s a black devil out there and he’s headed this way.” He slowly began to lower himself back down into the water; she did the same.

“Not too fast, slow and easy; he hasn’t seen us yet. Thank God there’s no moon tonight.”

*Whitey, we have a black headed this way. Seth called to the White; He’s out over the ocean headed towards the Bay. How the hell did they find us?*

*Calm yourself dear boy. Valotin has sent Essex to destroy him. There are two more on the other side of the Bay behind the mountain curtain, the White informed him. Elliott and Cedric have been sent to take them out. Good experience for them. We wanted to make sure that they were just stragglers and not scouts sent by the black bull. I suggest you both get dressed at the first opportunity.*

Seth turned around slowly to tell the girl what was happening and stopped. For a moment he was frozen in time. The look on her face sent him reeling back to a place long ago.

He was back with Rebecca again; swimming in the ocean, making love on the beach, and living! The moment passed and he quickly pulled himself together. He began to explain in a low whisper when Hannah stopped him.

**“Lady Vesta has already explained everything Seth. Look, here comes Essex and Vail. That poor mad creature has no idea what is about to hit it.”**

**Essex came straight from above, quiet as a breeze he dove on the unsuspecting creature and flamed it to ash before it could warn the others. Seconds later they heard screeches and loud roars from the other side of the Bay. A flaming tattered dragon shot out and raced by only to be stopped by a blast from Essex.**

**Seth urged Hannah out of the water and shielded her from view of the others as they grabbed their clothes and dressed. As he was pulling on his boots, Hannah leaned over and gave Seth a peck on cheek.**

**“We’ll be seeing each other again Seth,” she said softly in his ear. “By the way, the feel of your hands on my body surprised me,” her eyes flashed, “I liked it!”**

**It took him totally by surprise; it was so natural and so unexpected. He looked up at her and smiled before he could stop himself. He watched as she darted off into the jungle and headed towards her quarters. Her scent was all over him, intoxicating and wonderful; his mind began to race at the possibilities.**

**He was brought back to the present when he heard Elliott and Cedric shouting loudly. He saw the White heading his way and he got to his feet.**

**“Bloody good show! We were told there were only two.” Elliott was puffed up and beaming with pride at his first kill. “That was absolutely thrilling; my Lazar is the fastest dragon ever. Did you see that Cedric, we were on them before they even knew it?”**

**“Yes, yes!” added Cedric, “invigorating beyond belief. Trinidad moved like the wind. His charcoal color kept the bloody beasts from seeing him till it was too late.” Cedric was grinning from ear to ear. He looked to Essex and Vail, *how did we do?* He asked excitedly.**

**“Essex will answer your question,” Vail informed them.**

***A little slow at first, but you made up for it in maneuverability and force. None of the creatures were able to send a warning. All in all, I would say not bad for a first time out. He roared approval loudly. Congratulations to both dragons and riders!***

**“Wait till we tell the others; first kill...hmm...” Elliott was thrilled, *so this is what it is like to slay rogue dragons. Lazar you were wonderful! I am so proud of you, my friend.***

***You were properly agitated and gave me enough flame to use against them. We both made this happen. But we must practice more on the flaming; I know you can give me a larger and hotter flame. Elliott knew Lazar had a thing about flaming.***



The White flew down to the jetty and Seth leaped on his back from the large boulder. *We go to explore further down the coast, these dragons had to have come from somewhere; the White explained quickly. Have a nice swim?*

*I don't want to talk about it!* They rode in silence for some time. Seth kept reliving the evening's happenings over and over in his mind. Her scent, her defiant attitude, it was gnawing at him; he was attracted and cautious at the same time; so familiar and yet, so new. *She's a human woman, how can she remain unaffected? How does she do it?*

*Perhaps she knows you better than you know yourself,* the White offered.

*I said I didn't want to talk about it!* Seth snapped.

*Then stop thinking about it old boy. You have me so worked up that I'm thinking about taking a mate myself!* The White snapped at him. Privately, the White was pleased with his reaction.

*Okay, okay!* They continued on in silence but Seth couldn't help remembering the feel of her skin on his. Somewhere, at the very core of his damaged soul, a small spark began to burn with hope.

With a lurch the White suddenly went full force straight up to the heights.

*What is it? What did you see?*

Seth leaned over and looked below. There were at least ten black dragons moving slowly across the land. They appeared to be looking for something.

*You think our visitors belonged to them? We better warn Valotin, they could be in Dragons Bay by mid-morning.*

*Already done my friend, Valotin is going to prepare a welcoming committee to greet them. Give the recruits a chance to use their new skills.* The White flew up higher and tried to backtrack these dragons to see where they came from. *They must have a small base somewhere in the area. None look too young, so there probably is no hatching ground here. Perhaps the black bull left a few here to keep watch while he went further on. When he was caught in the blizzard, he simply left these poor wretches to their own devices.*

*Sounds like something he would do.* Seth thought for a moment. *Hey Whitey, now that he's out, you don't suppose he'll head this way to pick up this group? I mean he's going to want to build up his forces pretty fast.* The White was beginning to get Seth's point. *If he shows up here and there are no dragons - well now. You know he'll tear this continent apart till he finds out what happened to them.*

*You have a point Seth, a potentially dangerous point. I need to confer with Valotin on this; we are too close to risk the game now.*

They turned around and headed back towards Dragons Bay at a fast clip, the White conferring with Valotin along the way. He flew directly to the plateau and Seth dismounted and joined the other leaders.

James was speaking to Valotin, with Adam nearby, *my friend it could pose a big problem. I wonder... is there anyway we could make it look like the town was abandoned a long time ago? We could send everyone to the hidden city and the rest of us could go to the heights and wait till they passed.*

*Is there enough time to accomplish this?* Valotin asked and then a thought struck him and he turned to Adam. *Adam, could your avian friends aid us in some way?*

*I don't see...wait a minute! Yes! Yes they could. I have an idea Valotin, Adam answered him excitedly, how about when everybody is gone, I have them to pick up bits of grass and debris, and maybe some fruits, sticks, anything. They could fly over the town and drop it everywhere. The larger birds could shake the trees and deposit all the dead branches all over the place. I mean, from the air it would look like the town was unused. It's a weak plan I know, but it just might work.* Adam looked about feeling a bit foolish.

*No, Adam, it is not a weak plan. It will buy us the time we need. Go and ask your friends and have them start immediately.* Valotin now turned to James. *James, have Elliott get the entire town ready and move them to the hidden city. I have already asked the Shaman for this favor and he is sending two of his people to lead them. Ichor is calling his riders and dragons and they will take to the air within the hour. We must hurry.*

Several dragons landed on the plateau and their riders ran to James to see what was going on. He explained quickly as Valotin continued, *we have only a few hours to accomplish all this. We must hurry. And Adam, I request that you ride with Lady Emily. I do not believe you will be able to reach the heights on your own and retain consciousness. Now everyone go, go quickly!*

Two hours later the town looked like every other deserted town in the area. The birds had outdone themselves in covering every trace of a path or road. The high plateau was covered in downed palm trees, (with a little help from the dragons), and debris. When they were finished Adam told his avian friends to hide in the jungle till the danger passed. The town looked as if it had been hit by a hurricane. Dragons and riders waited above to see if their plan would work.

Seth scanned the large groups of dragons quickly and found Hannah and her dragon just behind Ichor. *Take care little girl,* he thought to himself. The action did not go unnoticed by Ichor.

The morning sun rose over Dragons Bay to reveal a quiet and abandoned town. The dark band of dragons came over the hill and fanned out checking everything. As they reached the Bay several landed on the beach. The lead dragon raised his head and sniffed the air.

*Used to be many people and animals here. But they left a long time ago. This place is deserted just like all the others. Damn, where could those three fools have gone? Search the area!*

A half hour later – finding nothing – they left and headed back the way they had come.

Valotin instructed everyone to remain above. *There were ten dragons when they arrived. I counted only nine leaving. We will wait to see what they have planned.*

Forty-five minutes later a lone dragon came up over the top of the plateau and swept down to the water's edge. He flew over the area again and scanned it all the way to the shore. Several small birds flittered about as if they were oblivious to his presence. Searching and finding nothing, he headed in the direction of his friends, increasing his speed to catch up with them.

**Valotin, Ichor and the White conferred before leaving the heights.**

*I think it would be wise to leave the town in this disarray. Valotin began, we can ill afford for them to find us now. From here on out - we post sentries; everyone will take a four-hour shift. We need to keep a sharp eye for they may yet return for a last look.*

*Agreed Valotin, replied Ichor, it is too close to our time of retribution. I will inform the Shaman of our decision. He will keep the people safe in his underground city. He is very wise for a human. He is also very advanced in age; I worry that the strain may be too much for him. I have given this some thought and I have a suggestion, if you approve.*

**The White knew what he was about to offer. I see where you are going with this Ichor; it is sound and would be appropriate.**

**Perplexed for a moment, Valotin asked, what it is that you propose?**

*When we begin our task, we will leave two dragons and riders here for safety's sake. The Shaman must be able to confer with them at a moments notice and they with him. Ichor saw recognition dawn on Valotin as he continued; I propose a small enhancement with just one dragon. This will not only allow him to converse with the dragon; it will also add a few years to his life. He will be younger, but not too young; his intellect will be increased, and he will also be able to speak with all the people under his care. He has proven himself to be of good heart and trustworthy, and I for one believe that he deserves this honor.*

**Valotin thought for a moment, yes, I see the wisdom in your plan. But which dragons do you plan to ask to remain behind?**

*That is the question, answered Ichor. They are all eager for the coming fight. We both have lone dragons without mates; perhaps they would agree to do this thing. Ichor looked straight at Seth; you know of whom I speak do you not?*

**Yes Ichor, Seth answered thru clenched teeth.**

**Let it be done then, commanded the White to Seth's dismay. Call them and inform them what is required of them. I believe Lady Emily's Dragon, Lady Arian, is best suited for the Shaman.**

**Agreed, I will go and inform them both. Ichor left them and headed towards his waiting group of dragons. Dragons and riders were informed of the decisions about the town. They were instructed to go about their business but to leave the town in disarray. Sentry duty rosters were drawn up and posted and each rider checked the schedule**

**Lady Arian and Lady Vesta were called to the plateau by Ichor and were asked to accompany their dragons. Both asked the other if they knew what was going on. They appeared before Ichor and bowed in respect, as did their dragons.**

*I have asked you both here for a reason, Ichor began addressing the dragons; Valotin and I have great confidence in you and your rider's abilities, which is why we have singled you out. We have a special task to ask of each of you. Ichor explained their plan and what he would ask of Lady Arian. He told them to discuss it among themselves and then waited for their reply.*

**Hannah looked at Emily and began; I was really looking forward to the fight. But if Ichor says he needs us here to guard these people, we really can't refuse him.**

*Well said my lady; I am honored to be asked to do this thing for him,* interjected Lady Vesta.

Emily looked at Lady Arian, *well, what do you say my friend. Shall we do this?*

*Of course we shall my lady, Lady Arian keened loudly, we have been singled out and honored by our leaders. Why would we not agree?*

All four turned to Ichor and bowed to him in acceptance. Ichor loudly roared ‘Approval’, signaling a great honor; and all the dragons joined in. Lady Vesta and Lady Arian threw their heads back and joined in as the two women threw their arms about their dragons.

Ichor called to the Shaman and asked him to come to the plateau. Lady Arian and Lady Emily were waiting there with Ichor when he arrived. Ichor explained to him what they were proposing to do. He also explained what enhancement was and what it would mean. He explained about the changes that would occur to the Shamans body, and the vast amount of knowledge he would be given.

The little Shaman agreed without a moment’s hesitation; *I have dreamt all this and more, Great One, and I am prepared to fulfill my destiny,* he said solemnly.

Ichor and Lady Arian left the plateau with the Shaman and took to the heights. An hour and a half later they returned. A darkly tanned, well-muscled mature man jumped down from Lady Arian’s back. He bowed to Lady Arian thanking her, and then to Ichor. He was tall and carried himself with regal bearing. His thick black hair fell to his shoulders; his finely chiseled face resembled that of the Inca kings of legends. Dark brown eyes now held great intelligence.

He went directly to Lady Emily and taking her hand he said, “Lady Emily, I thank you for allowing me the opportunity to serve you and the great Ichor in this manner. You have always been kind and gentle with my people. I shall not fail you.”

Lady Emily was amazed at the changes in him. “Sir, it is I who am honored,” she replied.

When the Shaman returned to the underground city, the natives of his tribe fell to their knees thinking that he had been made a god. His great intelligence now allowed him to correct their thinking. He explained to them what had happened to him, what was to take place here, and how they must prepare for the coming months. He was able to converse with the townspeople easily and became quick friends with Wilhelm. Both were natural born leaders who recognized the other, and they quickly organized the people.

A week later Adam was flying over the Bay when a loud keen brought him to attention. A large buzzard came tumbling out of the thermals. He raced upward at blinding speed and caught the poor creature with a bone-jarring thud. Its wings were singed badly, and it was very frightened. It told Adam that the black one was on a rampage. The message it delivered was one of great urgency. Adam called to Valotin and raced to the plateau. Lady Emily was called to see to the injured bird.

*Valotin!* Called Adam as he landed with his heavy load, *the news is not good. The black has sent 200 dragons to England. He knows Alakar is there, and he plans to take them by surprise. They have been told to flame everything they see. This brave soul barely got away to warn us; two of his brothers did not.*

*My condolences on your loss brave one; we dragons will not forget your sacrifice or your bravery in coming here. We thank you and honor your brothers.*

Valotin turned and raising his large head bugled a loud call to arms. *So, he begins his move. It is time for us to begin our push.*

Ichor joined in the call and soon the entire region was aware that the dragons were leaving for war. Each dragon and rider knew what that call meant. They were about to begin the final battle for dominance of the earth. Riders dressed quickly in their battle gear and came to their dragons with their crossbows at the ready. Dried meats and flagons of water were passed out to each. The various squads were assembled and took to the air, waiting for their leaders. Final orders were given to Lady Arian and Lady Vesta. Ichor informed the Shaman that they were leaving for war telling him that he trusted him to protect the people under his care.

The hustle and bustle of the riders and their dragons leaving brought everything to a head for Hannah. Realizing she might never see Seth again, that it could all end; her true feelings for him emerged. She looked about for the White, sighting him several times only to lose him among so many riders and dragons mounting and taking off. She finally spied him off to the left. Her emotions were on edge as she made her way through the crowd towards him.

Feeling her turmoil and knowing what was coming, the White waited for her. He lowered his massive head as she pushed her way to him and stood before him unafraid looking up into his eyes.

*Please, her voice implored, please bring him back.*

*And why do you ask young one? He waited for her answer.*

*Because I... I care about the arrogant fool! She whispered, and added, more than I realized. She reached up and caressed his large face; I want to know if there really is something there. I feel deep inside that there is more to us; I can't explain it. Please, I want the chance to see if he cares for me.*

Just then Seth came onto the plateau and saw her there. *Whitey, what the...?*

*Then tell him this little one, and watch his reaction. Look, he comes now. He lifted his head and looked behind her; she turned and saw Seth standing there.*

He came forward with a question in his eyes. Without thinking she went to him and reached up and pulled him to her. She kissed him on the mouth quickly and said in a whisper, "Seth, come back to me...please? I know you're the one, I've dreamt it, I could see us..."

Seth's eyes flew wide in surprise, her naked body flashed before his eyes. "Hannah...?"

*To the heights, everyone up now, trumpeted Valotin loudly.*

"Hannah, I have to go," Seth threw his gear over the White's back and turning around looked at the troubled young woman, "I have to play this out to the very end."

There was great conflict on his face for a moment and then throwing caution to the wind, he took her in his arms and kissed her softly. This time she responded in kind, and he felt a burning sensation begin to snake its way up his spine. As they parted, he looked into her eyes and saw something he had not seen in a long time. His emotions exploded; feelings he had kept bottled up inside flooded his mind. He pulled her to him for a moment nearly squeezing the life out of her. After a few seconds that seemed like hours he let her go.

He cuddled her face in his hands saying; "if there is a way, woman; if they let me, I will return."

He kissed her again, caressed the side of her face and gave her a brave smile.

He ran and mounted the White, and took off with the others.

As they rose he looked below and his heart softened at the sight of her waving to him.

No one but Valotin noticed the White bugle a farewell to Lady Vesta.

*Things have changed Whitey, said a buoyant Seth. Did you see her?*

*I am not blind dear boy; the White said quickly. She came to me with no fear and asked that I bring you back to her. How is that for prophecy?*

Below, Hannah watched till the large bands of dragons were out of sight. Holding her face in her hands, she began to cry. Emily had seen Hannah and Seth embrace. Though surprised that there was a relationship between Seth and anyone, let alone Hannah, her heart went out to the girl.

“I didn’t know you two were involved,” she said cautiously.

“Oh, we’re not, not really. I mean, well there never was a relationship, so to speak,” she said as looked at Emily and threw up her hands in exacerbation. She then told Emily about their encounters, and about the dreams she had.

“I know it sounds crazy, but I also know he cares something for me; I can feel it. And, and I never realized how much I cared for him till just now.” Hannah raised her head and looked at Emily, “I could see us together Emily.”

Seeing Hannah so upset, Lady Vesta was beside herself with worry. She called her rider to her keening softly, *my lady come to me. My heart goes out to you but you must get hold of yourself. All is not lost.*

She asked her to mount and they were soon airborne. *You have always been a very levelheaded young woman, and now you let your emotions sweep you away. Shame on you! Get hold of your reason and think my friend!*

Hannah had never heard her dragon talk to her like this before. But she was right, she knew it; she needed to get it together. *I’m sorry Lady Vesta, you are right; I am letting my emotions take control of me. There are more important things to see to now.*

*Good girl!* Lady Vesta praised her return to reason, *besides I happen to know that things have changed. Thanks to you, Seth’s heart has softened. If he can put aside the hate, if he can fight for righteousness sake and not from hate; then he has a chance of returning to you. And, I might add, the White with him.*

Hannah was immediately aware of the tonal change and the inflection used by Lady Vesta in her last statement.

*Only the White knows what Seth thinks and what is in his heart. How could you know...*

Her dragon chuckled and suddenly, like a light bulb coming on, the truth dawned on Hannah. *Lady Vesta! You...and the White...but...but!*

*No buts my lady, she chuckled coyly, we dragons have our lives too. I would like to think that there are possibilities for us also. No one knows of this except for you. Let us make a bargain my lady. We will put all thoughts out of our minds and see only to the task at hand.*

Hannah felt like a selfish fool, *Agreed my beautiful dragon; I am so sorry I was only thinking of myself. I shall try to be aware of your feelings more in the future.*

They flew for another hour and talked of many things. Both rider and dragon bonded strongly that day. When Hannah returned to the plateau, she put Emily’s mind at ease.

Together the women planned out their strategy and set up sentry duty with Adam taking a shift also. Emily prepared the clinic for any injured riders that should appear. Hannah did the same above for the dragons. Adam organized his avian friends into an early warning system; the great condors assured him that a warning would be sent quickly should any dragon attempt to come over the mountains.

Valotin and his band of fighters came out of the thermals over Scotland. They held to the heights as he called to Alakar and warned him of his pending visitors.

*Ichor went on to France and will bring up the rear. We will have them trapped between us, my brother. The White scouts ahead for us. You have the honor of first strike.*

*Excellent my friend, this will be delicious just deserts for those vermin. But Valotin, what worries me is that if the bull sends them here, what else is he planning? He knows we know his tactics. Perhaps he plans to change them and surprise us even more, Alakar postulated.*

Valotin closed his eyes and looked to where the bull was last reported; he could pick up nothing. *I sense nothing, Alakar my brother, the future is closed to me from this point on. We must hope that our ghosts will send a message. Meanwhile, let us prepare a welcoming committee for our visitors.*

At the same time this was occurring, in a small cave deep inside a very large mountain, a message was being prepared for delivery. Lee Chin was telling a rather large buzzard to take a message to Valotin. The bird left quickly and raced to the skies above. He entered the thermals and rode them till he saw the landmark imprinted on his mind. He then took up position above a large stand of trees and spreading his wings, waited for a falcon to approach. When the bird appeared he delivered his message quickly and returned from whence he came. The falcon immediately left and flew to the high currants and sped his way to the jungle canopy. Keening loudly as he approached he called to Adam and delivered his message. Adam flew to the heights quickly and called to Valotin exactly as he had been instructed. A connection was made and Adam delivered his message.

*Valotin, a message has come from Lee Chin. The black bull goes to meet up with another large band of dragons; one called Loki leads them. And another thing, he says that the dragons are calling the bull, NaTas. He believes that they plan to out flank you. He says they do not know how large your force is, and believe that you have only thirty dragons at most. Good luck!*

Valotin thought for a long moment, then he called to Alakar. *News my friend from Lee Chin, it is not good. The bull has taken to calling himself NaTas. We all remember that name do we not? He goes to meet up with one called Loki, the Norse devil of old. It is time to inform the riders of these two and infuse them with the strength they will need to flame us. Alakar your group should go first.*

*I have already done this with my riders Valotin. Alakar answered him quickly; I saw the need early on when we returned here. But I will inform them all of this new development. We will keep watch; take your riders and go.*

Valotin took his riders to the heights and informed them about the two dragons. *The bold black bull now has his minions call him, NaTas. It is an ancient name from the past; it means evil one. And believe me the name is aptly applied. He hopes to intimidate us with this new title he seeks for himself. He goes to meet up with the Norse devil, Loki and join forces with him. If he is true to his character, he will kill Loki at the first opportunity and adsorb his forces. We must not allow him to gather any more forces to his fold.*

Valotin took on a bright bluish glow and continued to speak to his dragons and riders. *We begin our push this day. You have all trained well and I am confident in your abilities. You are one with your companions, and this is as it should be. Now we must infuse you with the strength you will need for this task before you. Listen well my children...*



Valotin continued on; like a coach before a big game, he instilled in them the importance of their mission. The fate of the world hung in the balance and it was up to them to win the day. Each one of them had been chosen for this special task; each one of them had been singled out for this great mission; they were more than any ordinary man. By the time he was through, each and every rider was eager to prove they were worthy of the honor that had been given to them. Then he touched each with his mind and a blinding flash of light spread across the sky. They returned below aglow with determination and filled with a sense of great purpose. They were ready!

*We will rid ourselves of these vermin and then we begin our push.* Valotin turned his attention to Alakar. *Alakar, have you any sense of them yet?*

*Within the hour Valotin, which puts them here at dusk, perfect timing. I have a suggestion. I have two dragons of the reddish brown colors, Kaseem and Lady Kai. He chuckled loudly, I propose we let them go to the floor of the canyon; the setting sun will mask them from the black ones eyes. As the last of them pass overhead they will flame them signaling us to attack.*

*This is something Theo and Susanna would love to have the opportunity to do,* James told Valotin, *they love to surprise the vermin.*

*Then make it so Alakar. Now my riders and dragons, fan out across the sky, remember your teammate, and remember your positions. When we dive on them there will be much confusion. It will be very loud, movement will be in milliseconds, and you must see and judge quickly. Your dragon will calculate the length of flame and the duration. Watch your backs at all times, these are crafty devils, and will strike at any opening.*

Alakar approached Kaseem and Lady Kai telling them what he had in mind. At the same time Peter was speaking to Theo and Susanna. They jumped at the chance enthusiastically; in minutes they were in place.

The attacking force was heard before they seen, howling, screeching, and roaring madly as they came over the ridge. The setting sun blinded them for a moment as they crossed the valley below. Kaseem and Lady Kai waited till the last of them passed and then let loose with a burst of such intensity that four of them were engulfed in seconds.

Seeing the flames shoot out and take down the four dragons Alakar shouted the order, **ATTACK! Go, my warriors, and take them out!**

Thirty dragons dove out of the sky on the unsuspecting horde. Thirty dragons fell in flaming debris just as fast. Alakar's clan fought with such ferocity that the surprised vermin tried to flee. Valotin ordered his dragons and riders into the fray. They dove into the center of them taking out fifty of them with a spinning formation. Diving from above James and Elizabeth attacked four of them quickly and turned them to dust. Three tried to separate Vail and Amanda and went down in flames. Four more attempted to flame the riders and met their doom just as fast.

Sean and Terry could be heard shouting loudly, their dragons were flaming with such speed that they couldn't keep up with the number of dragons that fell. Cedric and Elliott worked as a team drawing them out and flaming them quickly. Their dragons moved so fast that the black devils couldn't get a fix on them. They died before they realized that they had been hit.

The battle, if you could call it that, lasted a mere twenty minutes.

Riders and dragons regrouped with their leaders. Adrenalin was flowing like wine:

“Did you see how many fell...”

“I got two so fast that was blinding...”

“I saw Valotin take out four so fast that I couldn’t believe it!”

“Did you see how surprised they were?”

On and on it went, the untried riders were awed at their new power. First battle always had this effect on the riders. Each battle would bring more confidence, and better flaming skills, but nothing to compare with the feeling of ‘first kill’.

James shouted out to his riders, “are there any wounded? Check your dragons carefully, check yourselves also.”

The White returned to the group about a half hour later. *He had two scouts to observe the battle, he reported. Both have returned to the dust they came from, he chuckled.*

Seth leaned over towards James, *your people fight with passion James; you have trained them well.* James was surprised at receiving such praise from Seth. He nodded in acknowledgement.

*Now NaTas must guess at our location and force, Valotin stated, he will run to the high mountains to regroup. We must deny him any sanctuary. Lazar and Trinidad, Valotin called to Elliott and Cedric’s dragons, remain here for at least a half hour. Bring up our rear; keep a sharp eye out for any stragglers. There may yet be one or two of the devils well hidden, waiting for us to leave before they show themselves. I put nothing past NaTas; he is a crafty devil and would anticipate our looking for scouts.*

*We are honored Valotin!* The two dragons answered with enthusiasm.

Alakar took his force and spreading them out to the left, headed towards France. Valotin followed shortly, fanning out towards the right.

Ichor was waiting in France for the forces to meet up with him. He had seen no sign of dragon activity. This puzzled him for he knew the black bull was regrouping and would have to pass this way. Valotin called ahead and told Ichor of Lee Chin’s message.

*NaTas! So he calls himself by the name of old. Does this one think he is so powerful? Their arrogance always amazes me Valotin; they always believe themselves to be invincible.*

*And that is precisely why they fail,* Valotin quickly replied.

As the group headed across the countryside they began to notice large groups of people below them, waving. James realized that these people had received the messages and were now looking to the great force as deliverers. They were waving encouragement to the passing dragons.

Valotin sent a quick message to Essex and Lady Elise. Pairing off from the group, they banked right and flew low over the cheering people, their riders waving to them. There were looks of amazement and surprise, and then thunderous shouts from the large crowds.

*They know we fight for them my friend,* Essex told Vail, *and they cheer us on. This is a very good sign.*

*Yes Essex, they believe in us.* Vail was buoyed by the thought of being considered a hero. *Amanda, my love, did you see? We’re heroes, how about that!* Vail looked and saw her laughing.

*Don't get too cocky Mr. Hero; we still have a long way to go, she told him. But I must admit that it's rather nice to see. Let's make one more pass and then catch up with the others. With the peoples cheers still ringing in their ears they banked and headed off to rejoin the others.*

*As they joined up Essex relayed to Valotin the cheers of the people. It is a good sign indeed Essex, we have the people on our side this time; they are not afraid of us. Everything is different this time. I believe Essex, that perhaps this is the last time we do this.*

*My liege! Essex's voice betrayed his surprise. Is it possible? I know there is a prophecy of the end, but do you really think that we are the ones who have this honor?*

*I can only tell you what I feel Essex, and it definitely feels different this time. Valotin looked at his friend, it would be a good thing to live out our lives with man - to see where all this will go.*

*They suddenly heard Ichor calling to them. Valotin! Good to see you my friend. There has been no activity here, except for people waving to us as we passed by. It warmed our hearts to see them cheering us so.*

*Yes Ichor, Valotin answered him; we had that happen to us as well. Essex and I were just discussing the fact that things appear to be different this time.*

*So I noticed Valotin; all the old prophecies seem to be coming true. It makes a dragon wonder about the last one. But enough of such talk, we have much work to do. Ichor watched as Valotin's clan came into view. A mightier force he had never seen on this planet, or any other planet for that matter. He felt good about the coming fight.*

*Ichor, what is all this about the last prophecy? Sarah was curious about the talk between the dragons. Or is this something that we humans are not privy to?*

*No, no my lady, it is not like that. It is not considered good luck to second-guess the plans of our Creator. This is the task we have been given; this is the task we shall complete. The rest is all conjecture. Ichor continued like a school master teaching a student. There are many prophecies in dragon history little one. But I can say this; never before have all the prophecies been fulfilled in the order that has occurred here and now. Even the great 'sleeping one' has arisen; it gives one pause to reflect on such things.*

*Suddenly from out of nowhere a large black darted out from cover and went straight for Ichor. Moving faster than the eye could see Ichor swept up and turned in mid flight, with Sarah shouting in a rage, "you filthy bastard, how's about a taste of this?" Ichor's flame turned him to dust.*

*The White pulled up alongside Ichor. Seth leaned over and grinned at her openly, you fight like a dragon, woman; you have a hell of a flame there! You are indeed worthy to be sitting on the back of Ichor, well done! They sped away just as fast.*

*What was that all about? Jackson asked, Sarah looked at him and shrugged her shoulders.*

*Very strange, Seth gives no compliments, especially to a woman. Ichor chuckled, no offense to you Lady Sarah, but the man is an enigma. Keep Jackson close to you when you are on the ground.*

*Lady Isabol came alongside Ichor. My liege, what was that all about? Jackson is not very happy about Sarah being singled out by Seth.*

*All is well my mate; Sarah can take care of herself.* Ichor answered her.

*Sarah, be careful around that rake, Jackson called to Sarah, he has his eye on you, and from what I've heard about him, that's not a good thing.* Jackson was worried about her safety.

*Jackson, my love, you are the only man I want near me. You know I can take care of myself, and I can yell pretty damn loud too!* Sarah laughed loudly; *he'll have his hands full if he tries anything with me.*

*This is nonsense;* the White broke into their conversation, *Seth is changing.*

*From what I have heard he is not to be trusted,* answered Jackson defiantly.

*Things have changed recently; besides you fear needlessly; he will not use his power on any of the women here. We are in battle mode now; he uses his energy to fight. Now cease this chatter.* He said angrily and flew off in a huff.

Seth looked at the White, *What was that all about Whitey, why did you shut me out,* he demanded angrily?

*It was nothing my friend; I was just setting them straight. You know humans; they get all caught up in the stupidest things. Now, enough of this talk, we have dragons to kill!*

They continued to fly towards a line of mountains in the distance.

Hidden deep within this mountains range was a secret camp, a camp defended by a powerful weapon. A very agitated man was running down stone steps hurriedly, fear was on his face.

He ran into the commander's office shouting, "There's a large group of dragons coming our way Jacques, and they are spread all across the sky from horizon to horizon!" Pierre was worried they had been found out and were about to be attacked by the fiery monsters.

"Do you think they know we are here? Those two monsters we took out last month must have left a trail and they have back tracked them here!"

"Calm yourself, Pierre," said Jacques making his way to the parapet; "wait till they get closer and we can see them better." Jacques reassured him, "we have not stayed alive this long for nothing. Remember Marie's dreams, help is coming; now get me the binoculars."

Pierre carefully rushed down the gray cold steps inside the mountain fortress. He had great confidence in Jacques' leadership. He had saved his life; hell, he saved many lives with his foresight. He had been the one who had seen and recognized what was happening before any one else. He had come to this area with a small band of men and prepared this place. It had once been an archeologist's museum of cave drawings; with steps leading deep into the mountain. A military man, he had taken with him the best demolitions experts and engineers in his unit. He had hollowed out the inside of this mountain and made it the fortress it was. He had organized the engineers to build the huge catapults. The nearby forests served up the best wood they used as their giant spears; stakes at least ten to fifteen feet in length. They had prepared well, and it paid off many times. In total they had felled 7 of the foul black devils that tried to penetrate the mountain. Jacques had gathered up all the people he could find still alive, and brought them here to safety. Pierre trusted his judgment without question.

Jacques was a 5'10" powerhouse of a man. Long silver and gray hair tied at the nape of his neck, chiseled leathery features, and stark dark eyes gave him a haunted look, eyes that had seen too much. He demanded discipline of everyone in this small band of humans. He instinctively knew each mans weakness and strength, and used these to keep them alive. Each person had been given a task; each person had felt they were important to the whole. This was how he had kept them all together; his sheer will was what bound them and kept them going. They had managed to withstand the worst of the burning, and they had come out of it changed, but alive. He was not about to give in now.

Pierre returned and handed him the binoculars. *Lord please let her dreams be true. I don't how long we can keep going like this.* He silently prayed.

He raised the binoculars to his eyes and looked. What he saw took his breath away. He lowered them for a moment, looked down as if thinking and took a deep breath. He raised them and looked again. Before him he saw a large white dragon, with a rider on its back! Behind it, spread across the sky, were many, many more dragons; and they all had riders!

"Get Marie up here! Quickly man! Move! He barked out his order and Pierre ran to get her. "Please let it be her dreams come true," he said to no one under his breath. *Mon Dieu! Is it possible!*

Jacques watched as the large group approached the outer reaches of the mountain valley. Pierre returned with the woman named Marie. A tiny little woman in her forties; she was slight of frame, with graying brown hair, and brilliant blue eyes. Their seer, as Jacques called her. Many times she had warned them of an impending attack and saved their lives.

Jacques smiled at her and gently handed her the binoculars.  
“Marie, I want you to look and tell me what you see.”

She took them and stepped up onto the rocky ledge. She held them to her eyes and looked. *Yes!*  
“It’s them, Jacques, at last they have come!” Her face lit up in a huge smile, “just like the dreams, it is the White, and Seth rides him.”

“You are sure Marie?” She nodded quickly, smiling. “Warn the forward sentry to allow them to pass,” Jacques ordered, “Quickly man, we can’t afford to shoot down our saviors.”

The men in the forward battlement post were too busy watching the approaching horde of dragons in abject terror to notice the flags being raised at the main battlement. Their leader had dropped the only pair of binoculars they had and shattered the lens. He couldn’t see the different colors of the dragons, or the riders on their backs. In fear he had ordered the catapult made ready.

The White began to enter the large mountainous valley and immediately felt danger.  
*Something is not right here Seth, do you feel it? There is something here.*

*Yes Whitey, I can feel fear, but something else too.* Seth took a long deep breath thru his nose. *I smell humans, great fear, and battle! Seth’s eyes suddenly flew wide, bank to the left, quickly!*

The White had felt it too. He suddenly banked left and went straight up with lightening speed. A huge wooden spear went flying by and both dragon and rider felt the wind from it as it passed.

“Son of a bitch!” Yelled Seth, *Those crazy fools! They almost killed us!*

“Captain, captain, the flags are raised, they say to let them pass.” One of the men at the forward post shouted. “Cease fire sir!”

The captain turned and looked in the direction of the main camp. Three white flags were flying above the battlement. “Sacre bleu! We may have ruined everything; Jacques is going to have my head for this blunder.”

“Those idiots!” yelled Jacques in a rage. “What the hell is the matter with them? Didn’t they see the riders on their backs? Idiots! I have idiots in my army!” He marched off the plateau and went below. “Get me a runner, be quick about it!” A sergeant came running around the corner, eyes wide in fear. “I want you to get to the forward battlement and tell those fools that they are to let these dragons pass. They are not to fire again, do you hear me?”

“Sir, yes sir!” The man turned and left at in a dead run.

Jacques went back above. “Marie, can you talk to them; can you make contact? Tell them we are sorry, it was a mistake?”

“I’ll try Jacques, but I can’t promise anything.” Marie turned and sought out the White. Locating him, she closed her eyes and concentrated in his direction. Calling out with her mind she sent a message...*sir, sir, it was a mistake. We mean no harm, large one, forgive us, please!*

She was answered almost immediately, *that was a little too close for comfort dear lady.*

“Oh!” shouted Marie in surprise, turning around. “He answered me Jacques; he speaks to me in my mind.”

“Tell him, tell him quickly...” Marie held up her hand and turned back to face the approaching White.

*Our communications with our forward battlement was disrupted. We had no way to tell them not to fire. We ran up the flags, but they did not see. Marie took a deep breath and continued, please forgive our error. We have been waiting for you for so long. Dreams told us of you and your fight; they said you would be coming this way.*

*Calm yourself dear lady, we understand the error. The White assured her. Dragon etiquette demands that I ask whom I am addressing.*

“He asks my name Jacques,” said Marie excitedly.

“Well tell him silly woman...!” he shouted in exasperation throwing up his hands.

*My name is Marie; I have the gift of sight. You are the White are you not? He who battles?*

*Your sight does you well Marie, answered the White softly. Yes, we are beginning the battle to rid the world of the black menace. My rider is Seth, slayer of dragons. May we land?*

“He asks if he can land Jacques.” Marie was wide eyed as she waited for Jacques to decide. “His rider is called Seth; they slay the black dragons.”

“Tell him there is a landing plateau just on the other side of this battlement. We will greet him there.” Inside Jacques was filled with awe at the prospect of meeting this beast and its rider; but outwardly he showed no emotion. “Warn everyone inside of the events and tell them to stay put,” he ordered his adjutant. “We shall see what happens.”

Marie relayed the message to the White and was told that the lead dragon, Valotin, and his queen would also join them.

“Three dragons?” Jacques shouted, “A Queen? What is all this... alright, let’s go and see.” Jacques was quickly feeling that all this was out of his league. “Pierre you will come also, Marie, you stay close to me.” She nodded quickly in agreement. They descended the steps and strode down the long stone hallway to the opening that led to the plateau. The three of them stood there watching the approaching three dragons. Jacques eyes were wide in surprise at the size of the beasts. *Mon Dieu, he thought to himself, these are giants compared to the others.*

The three dragons landed on the plateau, the White and Valotin and Lady Valeria. Their riders climbed down and stood by their dragons. Elizabeth removed her riding cap and there were gasps of surprise.

Seth stepped forward and removed his helmet; “I bring you greetings from the Dragons of Light. Who is the leader here?” He asked in a booming confident voice.

Jacques stepped forward on unsteady legs and answered him, “I am.” He stared over Seth’s shoulder at the dragons behind him, “My name is Jacques.”

**“I am pleased to meet you, Jacques. I am Seth, rider of the White.” Seth made a sweeping gesture with a bow and then held his arm out towards Valotin.**

**“Behind me are our leader, the mighty Valotin and his queen the Lady Valeria. Their riders are James, and his mate, the Lady Elizabeth. James is the leader of our human riders.”**  
Using all his charm Seth stepped forward in front of Marie and bowed. **“And this must be Marie, she who sees.”** Eyes wide, Marie blushed deeply in surprise.

**Jacques stared at James and Elizabeth as they came forward. He had never seen such beautiful people; each glowed from within with some kind of force. He felt safe just being in their presence.**

**James and Elizabeth introduced themselves; “We thank you for stopping the attack Jacques. It would have been most unpleasant. We come in peace sir; we mean no harm to you and yours. We must pass thru this valley to approach the black devils from behind.”**

**“You and these beasts are going to kill the black monsters?” James nodded, “then whatever we can do to help you, just let us know. The sooner we are rid of these monsters, the better!”**

**“Jacques, you have done wonders here, it takes a man of great intellect to prepare such a place.” James praised him loudly so the others would hear. “I should like to introduce you to our leader. Dragon etiquette demands that I have your permission before he can speak to you.”**

**“Speak to me? Permission, I do not understand, the dragons speak?” Jacques was beginning to get an idea and he was not sure he liked what he was thinking.**

**“These dragons are different Jacques, they are Dragons of Light. They communicate with us telepathically,” explained James, “but they can only do so with your permission. It is against their nature to do so without it. Do I have your permission?”**

**Jacques looked at the three gigantic beasts. He noted that they were different colors. The white one was majestic standing there, its color brightly gleaming in the sun. But the deep chocolate brown one was almost regal in his bearing. His queen was a creamy chocolate brown and her eyes were mesmerizing. Inside he felt his conflict fade, times were different now, and Marie had spoken of all this in telling him of her dreams. He nodded to James, and stepped forward with him.**

**James led him to Valotin. “May I present the mighty Valotin, Fourth of the Ancients to return, the Dispenser of Justice,” James said with a flourish and bowed.**

**Seeing this, Jacques bowed slowly, and looked up. Valotin lowered his head and stared into Jacques eyes, *Greetings Jacques, you have done well here. You have saved many people and kept them safe from the black devils. I salute you on your foresight.***

**Jacques plopped down on his bottom, “Sacre bleu!” he blurted out. *You do speak!***

***Yes Jacques, we speak in your mind. Valotin said softly, he could see that this was having a profound effect on the man. We are here to seek your help in the coming battle. But first I must be polite and introduce my queen, the Lady Valeria, said Valotin turning his great head in her direction.***

**Jacques turned and watched as she lowered her head to him, brown eyes shinning.**

**Lady Valeria spoke in a sultry silky voice; *you have done very great things here Jacques. You have provided a safe refuge for these people and kept them safe from harm, she purred and keened. It proves***



*that you are a caring man, and a strong leader. We dragons value that in a man, it proves him to be of strong character and moral fortitude.*

Jacques looked up at her with a silly grin on his face. *Madame, you are so beautiful, it takes my breath away. I am humbled by your compliments.*

Elizabeth came to his side; *my queen has that effect on all who speak to her. She is a warrior queen, and a very wise judge of character.*

*You speak to me also in my mind,* a surprised Jacques replied.

*It is only thru Valotin that we are all linked in this way.* Elizabeth explained, *normally, only each rider and his or her dragon are linked telepathically.*

*You must forgive Madame; this is all too much for this poor soldier.* Jacques was suddenly overloaded with all this new information. He needed time to think. Sensing this James asked if they could come inside for a drink.

“Ah, but of course, please, forgive my poor manners. Come! Come with me, the people must be told of this great event.” Linking his arm in Elizabeth’s, he led the small group into the mountain. Seth remained outside with the White.

They were led into the main hall. James could see that it was used for meetings and dining as well. There was a huge fireplace against a wall with several large pots hanging over the roaring fire. Jacques barked a few orders and several people rushed off to another room returning quickly with platters of bread and cheese. Two bottles of wine were brought out, and some mugs.

“Please sir,” cooed Elizabeth, “we do not wish to take food away from your people.”

“Madame, you take nothing away from anybody. One thing we have plenty of, is bread and cheese,” he informed her to loud laughs from the assembled crowd. “Downwind, in another part of this mountain, is where we keep our livestock penned. We have many goats, thus we have an ample supply of cheese.”

While they were recounting the events inside, Seth and the White were keeping each other company with talk of the near miss. *You know Whitey; those catapults could come in handy.*

*Seth, I believe that Valotin is ahead of us on that one. He is already formulating a plan to put them to good use in the coming battle.* The White raised his head and spied a small child trying to sneak down the stairs. *We have company Seth; it is a child, quite fearless for one so young. She seems to be trying to get a better look at us. .*

The child sat there on the last step and peered around the corner at the large dragons. Her curiosity finally got the better of her and she stood up and slowly walked towards them. She couldn’t have been more than six or seven years old, she stood there in her rumpled jumper. Sandy brown disheveled curly hair, dirty face and hands, she walked out into the open and stood there staring up at Valotin.

Bowing, she looked up at him and said; *my name is Celeste, and I have dreamt all about you mighty Valotin.*

Seth and the White were stunned. *It appears that there is more to this child than we thought,* said a surprised Seth.

Valotin lowered his large head to the child and answered her, *yes you have young one. And you shall be a rider of dragons yourself one day soon.*

*Yes, I know this, and she shall be a beautiful blue color, like the night sky. The child reached up and leaned against the large dragon caressing Valotin's nose with her tiny hand, and she will be one of your children, mighty king, I have seen her many times in my dreams.*

There was a deep resounding chuckle that echoed throughout the castle area. She let go and stood back looking up at Valotin for many long minutes. Then she turned and ran back up the steps into the mountain, stopping only long enough to wink at Seth. She was followed by another deep resounding chuckle from Valotin.

Inside the mountain the news of the Dragons of Light were met with cheers from the people. Excitement was at a high. There was much talk and the meetings went well. Valotin informed James of the child and told him to inform Jacques.

Jacques looked around the room and saw Celeste up above looking over the railing. He smiled at her and called her down to him. He had found her hiding in a church, he explained, clinging to a dead puppy. She was all of four years old, terribly thin, and filled with the fear. Normally he would have left her. In those days it was run for your life; and only the strong survived. But something about her touched him to his soul. He had scooped her up and taken her with him to the mountain. She always delighted him, and he thought of her as the daughter he had lost to the beasts. She came running to him and climbed into his lap.

“Papa, I spoke to Valotin. I told him of my dreams, and he said I was right; I will be a dragon rider.” She gleefully told him as she hugged his neck.

“Easy little one, we have guests. We must be polite,” he told her gently.

James and Elizabeth were aware immediately of the change in the demeanor of this tough leader. He became very soft and caring with the child. Even the toughest of men have their soft side; and for Jacques, it was Celeste.

“Valotin has just told me of your visit Celeste. He is very impressed with you.” James informed the girl, “It was very brave of you to go out there and talk with him. How did you know how speak with him?”

“My dreams showed me how. They showed me the jungle where you live; and the man who flies like a bird; and the large dogs, and all the old people who became young again...” she trailed off playing with a piece of bread.

James and Elizabeth looked at each other in amazement. “There is no way she could have known where we come from; nor about Adam,” said a stunned James.

“My Celeste has the most vivid dreams. I thought at first that they were just a child's way of coping. But her dreams have proved to be invaluable on many occasions,” Jacques explained. “When she tells me her dreams now, I listen and remember.”

“Valotin says that she will be a rider one day, Jacques. A great honor for your group.” James told him in a deep voice.

Jacques looked at the child and smiled, “so you will ride the great dragons little one, good! Off you go Celeste, grown ups must talk of war now.” The child scampered off down the hallway stopping once to turn and wink at James.

James laughed and turned to Jacques, “Now to business, how many of the catapults do you have?” James asked.

“We have six of them stationed around thee area. Pierre, please go and get the map. Also one right on top of this very mountain; it is concealed from view from above. A last resort if needs be. I planned well young leader; I have seen what those devils can do. I leave nothing to chance.” Pierre returned with the map and laid it out on the table.

James stared at the map and all the placements of the catapults imprinting it on his mind and passing it along to Valotin.

*Jacques, it is Valotin speaking, surprise on Jacques face and this time, a smile. How long has it been since they have attacked your camp?*

*It has been at least three weeks. For several months there was nothing. But there was a great rumbling in the earth about three and a half weeks ago, and then a few days later we spotted two of them coming this way. We took them out quickly.*

*Are there any other settlements in the surrounding area where they could feed, Valotin asked a startled Jacques?*

Jacques face paled, *No, I moved all those people here months ago.* Jacques looked at Valotin and James questioningly.

“If they have not fed, then his forces will be weak. They will be easier to take out,” James explained quickly to a nodding Jacques.

*But the black bull, NaTas, will be craftier and more vicious then ever. He may yet send a large force here to take you out.* Valotin said somberly.

James looked about the great hall, “Just how many people do you have here, Jacques?”

Jacques hesitated slightly, a bit uncomfortable, before he answered, “I see no reason not to tell you; we have two levels here, monsieur James. This one you see holds about 100 people.” Jacques said slyly, “but below, in the deepest part of this mountain; there are over three hundred people.” James showed great surprise. “They all take turns coming above for a few days at a time. This way no one knows how many there are hiding here.”

*You have thought this out very well Jacques. I salute your ingenuity in outsmarting the black devils. Valotin praised him. In saving these people, you denied the bull his feeding grounds. He will be livid with rage by now; and he will begin to make mistakes. Keep your people on alert, and Jacques, replace your forward post. The men there are unnerved and in need of rest. You cannot afford to make any mistakes now. I will keep you informed of our progress.*

Suddenly they all heard the flapping of wings and the unmistakable sound of a dragon in the air.

*Valotin! Essex called to him alarmingly, a force of thirty-five heads this way.*

*Mon Dieu! You must go before they see you, mighty dragon! Jacques shouted excitedly.*

*Not this time Jacques. James, Elizabeth, we must get above, Valotin commanded, Company is coming. Elizabeth ran to Lady Valeria and James mounted Valotin.*

*Jacques, go to your tower and watch; let your people see who fights for you. Valotin ordered as he took to the air.*

Seth and the White were waiting for them in the air. *Well that was interesting. I swear nothing is going to surprise me anymore,* said a disgruntled Seth. They banked and headed for the heights at lightening speed.

Below, Jacques ran to the parapet along with about fifty of the people right behind him. “Move, hurry, I want to see this!” As he reached the top he grabbed the binoculars and scanned the skies. Pointing, he shouted, “There, there they are! Look!”

All eyes watched as the black horde swept into the mountain range, bearing down on their mountain castle with great speed. There was a definite intake of breath as fifty people realized they were the targets of this dark flying horde of death.

A lone frightened woman wailed a despairing, “where are the dragon riders? Where did they all go?” Voicing what they were silently thinking.

Suddenly the sky was filled with dragons; very large dragons descending from above at lightening speed. Dragons emerged and swept over them from the left, dragons bursting thru them from the right. There were loud ear-splitting screeches and even louder roars; flames were shooting out in all directions. Jacques and his people watched in fascination as the battle began, and their guardians fought with the dark beasts.

As Jacques watched, he began to see the tactics the fighting beasts were using. The great dragons of light separated the beasts from each other. They worked in pairs and while one was shooting flames, the other was taking out the eyes of another with his or her crossbow. Setting up the next devil for the kill - they were very efficient at their jobs. They moved with such speed it was very hard to keep up with them. Many of the black ones fell to the earth in flames. The soldier in Jacques wanted to be in the air fighting with them.

As he continued to watch he to notice many things; these dragons of light were bigger than the black ones. They were faster and stronger; and there were more subtle little things that only Jacques would notice. Turning once he saw one rider dart in front of a flaming dragon and destroy it quickly, flying off without a scratch.

*Such bravery! Such courage!* He murmured to himself eyes wide in admiration. He turned and saw the faces of his people as they watched the battle, totally fascinated. Jacques thought to himself, *these dragons have my people mesmerized. They are encouraged by what they see taking place. These mighty Dragons of Light bring my people hope, hope for the future.*

“Did you see the woman riding that green, she took down four of them...”

“I’d swear I saw one that was red, like the sunset...”

“Yes, yes! I saw one that was green, forest green...”

“Did you see the size of them? They were so much bigger...”

“Fast, so fast, they move like lightening across the sky...”

In fifteen minutes it was all over. The people watched as several of them went to the ground and flamed the dead and dying to ash. Jacques was both amazed and humbled by the sight. "Mon Dieu, never have I seen such a thing!"

6

Valotin called to him urgently, *Jacques may we land a dragon? We have an injured rider.*

*Of course you may my large friend! I will get the physician immediately.*

Jacques went flying down the stairs calling for the physician to follow him. He rushed out onto the plateau just as Valotin and a dark forest green dragon landed. James jumped off of Valotin and rushed to the landing dragon behind him. Essex lowered himself close to the ground and Vail was able to slide off to a waiting James. His left shoulder was smoking, and his left leg had a searing burn.

"Aaah!" Screamed Vail in obvious pain, panting heavily, "damn the luck!" *Oh God! Essex? Are you all right, they didn't get you, did they?*

*My friend?* Essex raised his head and turned around towards Vail. *Are you hurt badly?*

"James! Oh dear lord... oh... this hurts like... hell..." Vail fainted dead away and Essex threw back his large head and roared loudly. The people above jumped back quite frightened.

*He has just fainted from the pain Essex, he has a will of iron you know this. Valotin quickly reassured Essex. He is strong of body; he will heal.*

*The fool leaned forward to shield my eyes from a flame! He offered himself in my stead. The devil that did this will do it to no other; I turned him to dust myself.*

Essex settled himself and began the dragon keen to ease Vail's pain.

Valotin told James to tell Jacques what the dragon was doing and why; he did so quickly. Jacques explained to the people and asked them to respect the dragon way of doing things.

They carried Vail below to the clinic and the doctor examined and dressed his wounds. He spent a long time working on Vail's leg. Then he prepared a shot of morphine. He looked at James and explained, "He has first and second degree burns on his shoulder, third and fourth degree on his upper thigh. There may be nerve damage to his leg; it is a very deep burn. I am going to give him a shot of morphine to ease his pain."

"No!" shouted James forcefully. "No drugs!"

"But the man will be in excruciating pain when he awakes." The doctor turned to Vail, needle at the ready, "I will not be a party to torture." James reached over and grabbed his arm.

"His dragon is keening to ease his pain. They are linked, if you give him this drug it will break that link, and his dragon will think he is dead. Believe me; you do not want that to happen." James stared into the doctor's eyes forcefully. "Just take a moment doctor, listen to the sound," James pleaded.

The doctor looked at James for a moment and then put the syringe down. He stepped back and went to the doorway. He stood there and listened to the sound filtering down from above. He began to

notice a very soothing feeling come over himself. He felt good, almost like he was on a Demerol high; and he knew that feeling very well. *Hmm... so this is the effect it is having on my patient.*

“My heavens, it is like a drug.” He turned to James, “forgive me, I did not understand.”

Suddenly they heard a commotion above, and Essex roar. Valotin told James that Lady Elise and Lady Amanda had arrived. James ran out of the clinic and up the stairs just as Lady Elise landed. Amanda jumped off and ran towards James, fear on her distraught face.

“Where is he? Where’s Vail?” Eyes wide she begged James to take her to him. She was oblivious to the crowd of people gathered there.

“He’s all right Lady Amanda; come with me, I’ll take you to him.” As they went below James let Valotin know that Vail would be all right. *His leg is badly burned Valotin; I don’t know the outcome yet, the doctor said he could loose it.*

*We will leave that information between you and me for now, James.* Valotin told him. Lady Elise settled herself besides her mate and began keening also.

The people inside were all gathered in the hallway leading all the way back to the main hall. Concern showed on their faces for the brave young rider who was burned protecting them. As James led Amanda down to the clinic many of the people commented on the beauty of the female rider; and humbled when they saw the pain on her face. They reached the clinic and Amanda rushed inside. She looked at Vail lying there wrapped up in all those bandages and burst into tears.

The doctor came to her side, “Madame, please, calm yourself, your husband will be all right. He is strong, and except for a few scars, I believe that he will pull thru this.” He took her hand and in his best doctor manner he assured that Vail would not die.

“Damn straight I won’t die,” said a weak voice. Amanda rushed to him, “I’m... I’m made of stronger stuff than you think.” He smiled weakly at Amanda, “hey there my angel!”

“Oh Vail I was so worried, my love. You had Essex in a fit; he is beside himself with worry.” Amanda kissed Vail and held his hand.

The doctor drew up a chair for her and told her to sit. He went to James and Jacques, “Let us leave them alone for a while. I find a good woman to be the best medicine in times like these.” They stepped into the hallway and it was only now that James realized the hallway was lined with people. Concern showed on all their faces.

Little Celeste came to him and tugged his hand. “Your rider is going to be okay.”

James looked about the hallway and back at Celeste. He smiled, “yes, Vail will heal. His mate is here with him, and the dragons are keening for him.” There were quiet sounds of relief from all.

“Is there anything we can do for your friend James? Anything at all,” asked a very concerned Jacques.

“May he remain here for a few days to heal?” James looked at Jacques to see if it would pose a problem. “The dragons will protect this area from all harm while they are here. But they will keen to ease Vail’s pain.”

**“The sound is very soothing. I have not seen my people so relaxed in long time; it should pose no problem. Anyone on duty will simply plug their ears with cotton!” Jacques smiled at him and patted his shoulder. “Your Vail will be safe with us James, I promise you.”**

**“Valotin will keep in touch with you and you can let us know how Vail is doing. We must leave quickly now, we do not want to draw attention to your camp,” James explained.**

**James took off down the hallway, and was met by many handshakes, gratitude expressed by all and pats on the back and wishes for good luck. He was pleasantly surprised at the good fellowship he received from these people. The future was going to be good place, he thought, filled with people of good will. He finally made his way to the top and immediately reassured Essex and Lady Elise that Vail was awake and in good spirits. He also let them know that the keening was working; it had already eased the pain Vail felt in his leg. He bid them both farewell and climbed on Valotin. They were airborne in seconds.**

**Valotin had kept everyone in the air informed on Vail’s progress. As they flew along in private now he asked James for the truth about Vail. *What did the doctor say about his leg?***

**James took a deep breath and answered in a grave voice, *he could lose his leg my friend. It was a very serious burn; the doctor said there was severe nerve damage. Only time will tell if he will keep it. The doctor says that even if he does, he will walk with a cane for the rest of his life.***

***And his ability to ride a dragon, to fly in battle, is it compromised?* Valotin was justly worried about Vail. But he also had to consider what effect this would have on Essex, his First Wing.**

***I honestly do not know Valotin. But I would venture to say that nothing, and I mean nothing, will keep Vail from flying Essex. If need be, he will go to Dragon’s Hill and ask Steve for his help. That man can do wonders and if Vail needs to have a device rigged so he can fly, Steve will create something for him. As long as Vail has Essex and Lady Amanda, he will be just fine,* James assured Valotin.**

***Good to hear you say this James; you have put my mind at ease.* Valotin now asked his friend, *now who would you propose as my Second Wing in his absence?***

***Lazar and Elliott my liege,* James said without hesitation. *He is quick on his feet, very adaptable; and most important - he understands completely what is at stake.***

**Valotin thought it over and agreed with James. *Let us go and inform them both of our decision.***

**Down below in the mountain Jacques informed the people that the rider and his lady would be staying for a few days. They were not to be bothered with questions and gaping faces. He sent them all on their way back to their varied chores. Then he called Marie to him. “Marie, I want you to think carefully. I would like to assign a couple to look after our guests; a levelheaded couple. You know most of the people here well; who would you recommend?”**

**Marie thought for several minutes, and then she smiled. “Henri and Antoinette; they would be perfect. They are young and in love; a perfect match for our young dragon rider and his lady love.”**

**“Good, make it so. But inform them of the necessity of closed mouths. I do not want the gossips to take hold here.” Jacques held her arm for a moment, “They are to guard the couple’s privacy and see to it that they are left alone. Understood?”**

**“Do not worry Jacques,” Marie assured him, “that is why I chose this particular couple. They will consider it an honor to care for our guests, and they will see to it that no one bothers them.”**

Marie went down the hallway and sought out the Henri and Antoinette. She explained what Jacques was asking of them and what he required of them. Just as she predicted, the young couple considered it an honor to be chosen for this task. The assured her they would take good care of the brave young dragon rider and his lady.

As they watched Marie depart, the couple looked at each other and smiled. **“What an honor for us Henri,” Antoinette whispered.**

**“Oui, Mon Amie, a great honor.” He pulled her to him and kissed her quickly, “Now, we must go and introduce ourselves properly.”**

**“Wait Henri, maybe it would be better to break the ice, so to speak, by bringing them a pitcher of water and a tray of bread and cheese. Then we can tell them that we have been assigned to see to their comfort.”**

**“Oui, as usual you have the better idea. Come, let us get busy.” They made their way to the kitchen and Antoinette pulled down a large tray. Jacques reached up to a shelf and took down a large pitcher. He filled it with fresh water and placed it on the tray. Antoinette placed two mugs on the tray along with some bread and cheese. They headed down the hallway amidst stares from the nearby people. Word soon spread throughout the community that Henri and Antoinette had been given charge of the two guests.**

Amanda was sitting by the right side of the bed holding onto Vail’s hand. He was dozing on and off. Amanda had spoken to the doctor during one of these sleep sessions and asked him to tell her the truth. He explained that his shoulder would heal in time and be good as new. But he was worried about his leg. It was a very severe burn, and he was certain that there had been nerve damage. He was not sure if he would have the full use of his leg once it healed; only time would tell. Amanda made the decision not tell him just yet how bad it really was.

**“Amanda? Are you there?” Vail asked softly.**

**“Yes my love, I’m right here.” Amanda could see that he was in pain. He was trying not to let her know, but she could see it in his face. “Do you want us to move you up closer to Essex? I know he would prefer it, he has been beside himself with worry.”**

**“Yes, I think that would help a great deal.” Vail watched Amanda and he could see the worry on her face. He hated putting her thru something like this. There was a light tap on the door and a young couple entered carrying a tray.**

**“Enchante Madame, my name is Antoinette,” she said with a short curtsy, “this is Henri. We have been assigned the honor of seeing to your needs while you are with us.”**

Amanda looked at the young couple and smiled. The girl was very pretty; she had long black curly hair and bright blue eyes. Amanda guessed that she was all of twenty, if that. The young man was in



his early twenties also, tall and well muscled. He had sandy brown shoulder length hair and was dressed in jeans and a navy blue tee shirt.

“Thank you so much for your consideration Antoinette,” Amanda told her. “I am Lady Amanda, and this is my mate, Vail.” She rose and went to them extending her hand.

“We are here to see to any of your needs my lady. If there is anything we can do for you, just tell us.” Antoinette could not help but stare at the beautiful woman. Never had she seen such beauty; and the man was very handsome too!

Amanda smiled at the girl, and turned to Henri and asked in her sweetest voice, “Would it be possible to move Vail up above, closer to his dragon? He would heal so much better near Essex.”

Henri looked to Antoinette and nodded, “leave it me my lady; I will make the preparations and return shortly.”

“Madame, may I be of any service?” Antoinette wanted to do something, she just didn’t know what.

“Come, sit with me Antoinette. I do not bite, I assure you.” Amanda was trying to put the girl at ease; she beckoned her to sit beside her. “Tell me of your life here.”

Antoinette sat beside Amanda and was soon telling her all about her life. She told her how Jacques have saved her and most of the people here. How they had fought the black devils and even killed seven of them. Then she told her about Henri, and their love for each other. As Amanda listened to the young girl, she remembered how she and Vail had met and fell in love. She asked her many questions about the people and their way of life inside the mountain. The girl told her of the many chores that each person carried out and how each person felt that they were contributing to the whole community.

About a twenty minutes later there was a knock at the door and Henri and the doctor entered. “Madame, I understand that you wish to move your husband above? I do not think that it would be a good idea. He needs rest and a sterile environment.”

Amanda stood up, “I understand your concern doctor, but Vail needs to be near his dragon if he is to heal quickly. I will not argue with you about this.”

Amanda has a look of resolve on her face and the doctor knew it was fruitless to argue with her. “Very well, we shall do as you ask.”

The doctor left and returned in minutes with a stretcher and several men. They carefully placed Vail on the stretcher and carried him out and down the long hallway that lead to the stairs to the top level. Many people along the way shouted their thanks and encouragement to him as he passed. Their concern seemed to cheer Vail and raise his spirits. As they reached the top level Vail could see there was an open room just off to the side of the landing area.

As they stepped out on to the landing Essex rose up and stretched his long neck to get a better view. Seeing the men carrying the stretcher he strained to get a glimpse of Vail. Amanda stepped out on to the landing and saw what Essex was doing.

**“Stop! Please wait a moment gentlemen.” she called out forcefully. The men turned as she came over to them. “His dragon wishes to see him. Please, bring him over here and step back for a moment.” They did as she asked and quickly moved back to the wall.  
*Lady Elise, please tell Essex that Vail is on the stretcher.***

**Lady Elise raised her head and turned in the direction of her large mate. She keened to get his attention; *Essex my mate, Vail sleeps on the stretcher. You may go to him.***

**Essex rose up to his full height, and there were gasps from the assembled people. He moved slowly towards the waiting stretcher and lowered his massive head.**

***Vail? Vail do you hear me?***

**He hovered above the sleeping Vail and then gently nudged his shoulder. Vail stirred opening his eyes.**

**“Essex!” Vail reached up with his hand and laid it on the giants face.**

***Oh Essex, it’s good to see and feel you. I thought I was lost.***

**He pulled himself up to a sitting position and threw his good arm around the dragon in an attempt to hug him. He laid his head beside his dragon’s nose and openly wept. A deep rumbling purring sound filled the plateau. The love between these two was plain to see and the scene brought a lump to the throats of many who were watching.**

***Your leg my friend, does it pain you?* Essex asked concerned, sniffing Vail’s leg.**

***Vail nodded, yes old friend, it hurts like hell. I don’t think they are telling me how bad it really is. You know Amanda; she’ll try to protect me from the bad news till I’m stronger.***

**Essex raised his head and backed away allowing the men to come forward and take Vail to his room.  
*Rest my brave friend, rest and sleep. I will be right here.***

**He moved back and settled himself again and began to keen lowly. The many people on the landing now looked at the large dragon with new eyes.**

**A bed they had brought up to the room earlier was made ready and Vail was carefully placed on it. Amanda went to him and set several pillows behind his back. She could already see the effect that seeing Essex again had on him; he was more relaxed. Being able to look out and see Essex nearby would allow him to relax and his leg to heal faster.**

**It was not a restful night for all concerned; Amanda greeted the dawn with a strained body and weary soul. She went down to the kitchen area with Antoinette to fix a couple of plates of food for her and Vail. She was pleasantly surprised at being warmly greeted by the kitchen staff. They practically fell over themselves in an effort to assist her. They quickly presented her with two plates piled high with food. After much joking and many hugs she and Antoinette left and went above. As she came out on the plateau she noticed that little Celeste was in the room with Vail. She watched the child interacting with Vail; he was gentle and loving with her.**

**“All right you two,” she said smiling as she entered the room, “what is going on here?”  
Celeste was sitting on the bed playing checkers with Vail. Amanda set the plates down on a nearby credenza.**

“Essex said he needed some company,” Celeste answered sweetly in a little singsong voice.

“Essex told you to come here?” Amanda asked incredulously, eyes wide.

“Uh huh,” she answered shaking her curly little head.

“Don’t be jealous Amanda, but she’s stolen my heart. She is such a sweet little thing and we’ve had a great time. But Uncle Vail has to eat now, so, off you go sweetie.”

Celeste leaned over and kissed Vail’s cheek and skipped off. As she passed Essex he lowered his head and chuckled deeply; she waved at him happily and scampered off.

“That child is amazing. Do you realize that she is communication with both Essex and Lady Elise? She’s going to be someone very special one day.” Amanda picked up a wooden board leaning against the table. She set it across Vail’s lap and placed the platter on it. He winced slightly, but grabbed the platter anyway. He was determined not to allow the pain to govern his actions. Amanda poured them each a mug of water.

“This looks great, I’m starving.” He dug in with gusto and emptied the platter in minutes. They talked about many things for the next couple of hours, and then Amanda insisted that he rest. He protested half-heartedly and finally gave-in. He fell asleep in minutes and Essex began a low keen to sooth his pain.

Jacques greeted Amanda with a big smile and offered to show her all around the large mountain fortress. She happily accepted. As he led her about she noticed that wherever they went they were met with smiles and good wishes for Vail’s recovery. Jacques had set up a very well run community. Dedicated men manned the large catapults in the outlying posts. Each was well aware of the seriousness of their position and the importance these catapults. They had saved many lives in the past with their quick action.

They returned around noon and Amanda was met by Antoinette and told that there was a small lunch waiting for her in the room. Vail had already eaten and he was waiting for her. She thanked her for her thoughtfulness and went into the room and greeted Vail. She told him all about the fortress and the many things that she had seen. They spoke for sometime, as Vail was feeling a lot better. The doctor showed up and changed Vail’s dressing, medicating it again with the salve. He bandaged it a little looser this time and Vail thanked him for it.

The approaching evening brought many people above to stare at the great dragons. There were low murmurings as they all made guesses about the great beasts. Watching them and realizing their curiosity Amanda decided to set them straight about the dragons. She began to regale them with lessons about dragon history and dragon etiquette. Then she told them all about Jake and Dragon’s Hill. She told them about the first battle and the defeat of the monsters in the States. She related the Hatching Ground battle and told them about Oreo and Tabs and Ash; and how they saved Jake’s queen. By the time she was finished they were begging for more. They all soon looked in awe at Essex and Lady Elise.

Later that evening Amanda walked along the parapet in deep thought. She was deciding how and when she was going to tell Vail about his leg. She heard footsteps behind her and turned around; Seth was coming towards her, and he was smiling.

**“Don’t be alarmed woman; I’m just here to see if there’s anything I can do.” Seth tried his best to be pleasant, “I like that man of yours, and I’d really like to help.”**

**“Well aren’t you a contradiction. I was told to be very wary of you, and to never be alone with you.” Amanda backed up and held up her hand, “Please... I don’t want ...”**

**“I came at the request of Valotin.” He stood there waiting for her to react.**

**“Valotin? What is it, has something happened?” Amanda suddenly noticed the conflict on Seth’s face and in his eyes. She suddenly realized that it was like Vail’s of a few minutes ago, trying to hide his pain from her.**

**Keeping his voice even and without emotion Seth answered her, “He says that you are to return to Dragons Bay as soon as Vail can ride. He can recuperate there in safety. He feels that both you and Vail are marked now. They will come for you if you stay here.”**

**“Seth, are you in pain?” she asked him softly.**

**She took him by complete surprise and he answered sardonically, “Only when I breathe.”**

**“I’m serious, Seth; I’m picking up pain and terrible turmoil. Can I help in any way?” Amanda was seeing a side of him that she believed no one saw.**

**“The truth be told, there is nothing you can do Madame; this is who and what I am. If I choose to fight it, there is inner pain.” He reached out and touched her hand briefly; “thank you for being considerate enough to ask.”**

**He turned to leave and for a brief second Amanda felt an overwhelming urge to hold him in her arms; to relieve his pain; to make passionate love to him. Suddenly aware of Amanda’s deep breathing, of the subtle shift in her stance, Seth realized what had happened. He shouted at her, “Amanda, Vail!”**

**Coming to her senses, Amanda fought to gain control of her emotions. *My God! Give me strength!* Reeling from the realization of what almost happened to her, Amanda understood the power that Seth held over women.**

**“I am so sorry for you Seth,” she said softly stopping him in his tracks, “what a terrible burden you carry.”**

**“Maybe not for much longer dear lady. Again, thank you for caring.” Seth held his gaze down, not wanting to cause further pain. “Valotin did say that you must leave here as soon as possible.”**

**“What about these people here? Won’t they be in danger if we leave? I can’t abandon them to those devils.”**

**“These people have been fighting those devils for years; never more than 3 or 4 of them attack at a time. They will be just fine.” Seeing the look on her face he continued, “If you two remain here, the devils will pick up on it and attack. Even Whitey insists that you two get to safety as soon as possible.”**

**“All right, all right, I’ll see what I can do. But his leg...” Amanda tried to stop the tears, but they came just the same. She turned away from Seth, “We don’t know if he can fly Seth, or if he will ever**

be able to fly again. He could lose his leg, the doctor just doesn't know yet. Vail knows nothing of this yet, he hasn't been told how severe the burn to his leg is."

"I'm sorry to hear that Lady Amanda, but we all know the risks of fighting. It doesn't make it any easier to take, but sometimes these things happen." Seth felt sorry for the lady, she was very concerned about her mate, and she obviously loved him a great deal. "Believe me, if NaTas thinks for a moment you and your dragons are here he will attack with everything he has. Right now Valotin has him on the run, but you know that could change in a matter of hours." Seth leaned close to Amanda, "get out of here as fast as you can," he hissed.

Amanda pulled herself together; "Thank you for coming Seth, I'll inform Vail when he awakes. We'll leave as soon as he is able." Then she looked at Seth and smiled, *Good luck to you, Seth.* She watched as Seth faded into the night and she heard the departure of the White fade away. She stood there thinking for a long time; when she made her decision she went to her dragon. Lady Amanda, Essex, and Lady Elise talked late into the night.

Vail woke the next morning and found Amanda up and dressed and sitting there sipping tea. She smiled and told him she had some news for him. Then she held his hand as she informed him of the truth about his leg; he took the news quite well. She told him of Seth's visit last night, and what was said. Then she told him of the decision she and Essex and Lady Elise had made. He knew better than to argue with her. He agreed with her thinking and the reasoning behind it.

Amanda sought out Jacques and told him that she was taking Vail to Dragons Bay. She explained that she and Vail had to leave or his camp would be attacked in force. There would be no way to repel such an attack without the Dragons of Light here. She thanked him for all his help and generosity. He told her he was sorry to see her go, but he understood what she was doing and why.

She then went to the doctor and spoke to him about the care of Vail's leg. She took notes as the doctor instructed her in the dressing, and the application of the salve. He explained the necessity of exercise several times each day for the next several weeks. He agreed to meet her on top and redress and bind Vail's leg for the journey.

Amanda then sought out Antoinette and Henri and informed them of her decision to leave. They understood and wished her well. They both said that they hoped to see her again after the war was over. She was headed back towards the plateau when Jacques came running after her.

"Lady Amanda, wait a moment, a question please." He caught up with her and took a deep breath, "will you take Celeste with you when you go!" He begged her with his eyes. "Please hear me out. We will be attacked - there is no doubt. I want her safe; in a place somewhere where she will have a chance to grow up. She has so much potential, such wonderful gifts. She must have the chance to grow up; to become what she is destined to be." He took Amanda's hand and held it to his heart, "please my lady, allow her this chance."

"Jacques, are you sure?" He nodded quickly, "All right Jacques, she can ride with me. But she must be dressed warmly, we will be traveling in the high reaches and it is very cold there. Pack her things in a duffel bag if you have one. I will be on the plateau."

Amanda watched him rush down the hallway and thought to herself how it must have killed him to make this decision. She knew that he loved the little girl very much; and she now realized that he must have been worried about her safety for some time. Their presence offered him a perfect chance to

place her out of harms way. Amanda came out onto the landing and saw that the doctor was in with Vail.

“How’s our patient this morning?” he was asking Vail, “Your wife has explained that you are leaving us. I am going to change your dressing, and also bind you for the trip. This is going to hurt, monsieur.”

“What else is new?” Said Vail in a droll voice.

As he began his work the doctor noticed that the large dragon was watching him. Essex had lifted himself up and was straining his neck to see what the doctor was doing to his rider.

“Your dragon is curious, no? He watches what I do to you,” the doctor told Vail.

“He wants to know what you are putting on my burn. He says it smells terrible,” Vail told him.

The doctor’s eyes flew wide, “Mon Dieu, he asks questions?” Vail smiled and nodded. The doctor went out to the plateau and looked up at Essex; they stared at each other several long minutes. Suddenly those eyes took on more; for the first time the doctor realized this was an intelligent, sentient being.

“Forgive me, but it is only now that I see you are more than a beast.” The doctor bowed to Essex as he had seen Lady Amanda do, Essex acknowledged him and lowered his great head.

“The legends are true after all,” said the doctor in obvious delight. Returning to Vail he began, “all right then, please tell your friend that the salve soothes the wound and protects it from infection. Only time and constant cleaning will allow the wound to heal from the inside out.”

“He asks how often this is done.” Seth relayed.

“It must be done at least twice a day. And you must keep the wound clean; it cannot get infected.” Essex chuckled loudly and the doctor turned around to face him.

“He sees that you now know the truth and it amuses him,” Vail explained.

The doctor smiled as he took out the bandages and began to wrap Vail’s leg. “I understand that you go very high when you fly. Exactly how high do you go; I ask for a reason sir.”

“We go the thermals and fly them to our home base. We exit them at a fast pace and then descend in a spiral to slow down. Why do you ask?” Vail looked inquisitively at the doctor.

“The air is thinner the higher you go,” he explained to Vail, “Your wound could open and ooze out precious fluids. If I bind you up tight, it should hold until you get where you are going.” He looked at Vail and placed his hand on Vail’s shoulder, “but when you land you must loosen the bandage immediately. There will be a great deal of pain, you understand?”

“Yes, I understand,” said Amanda from the doorway, “and I will see to it that it is done.” She brought Vail his flying jacket and helped him put it on. Then she went to the doctor and took his hand, “I want to thank you for all you have done for Vail. I have my notes and the salve; I will do as you instructed me. When this is over, perhaps we can bring you to Dragons Bay to look him over.”

**“Oui, oui, that would be good!” The doctor helped Amanda dress Vail for the trip. When they were finished he went to Amanda, “Madame, you are a very brave woman. I wish I could have done more for your husband. But with limited medical supplies, you understand?”**

**“You have done more than enough, my friend. Thank you for everything.” She kissed him on the cheek and gave him a short hug.**

**Henri came in with another large man and went to Vail, one on each side of him. They lifted him up and headed towards the waiting dragons. Essex lowered himself as close to the ground as he could get. The men’s eyes were wide in fear and awe of the mighty beast. Amanda instructed them to climb onto Essex’s wing and carefully inch their way to the ridge where the harness was. It was slow going but they managed to seat Vail on the ridge.**

**“Here, let me help Vail,” Amanda put the harness around Vail and secured him in; then she climbed down off Essex. “It won’t be long my love.”**

*It is good to have you on my back again my friend.* Essex told Vail as he adjusted himself and stood up.

*It is good to be on your back Essex, I have missed you. And yes, it still hurts.* He told him as he adjusted himself to a more comfortable position.

**Jacques came up onto the plateau with Celeste following behind. He handed a small duffle bag to Amanda and turned back to Celeste. Going down on one knee he drew her close to him and spoke to her.**

**“Now I want you to be a very good girl Celeste, I will send for you as soon as this is all over.” He hugged her tightly, trying not to cry. “I love you little one, and I will see you soon. Now go with the Lady Amanda.” He picked her up.**

**“Papa, do not cry. I will be safe, and you will see me again. I have seen all this in my dreams.” She put her little arms around him and kissed him good-bye. Jacques handed her to Amanda.**

**Amanda smiled sweetly at the child, “Celeste, this is my dragon Lady Elise.” The child looked up at the large dragon and smiled. “Now there is some dragon etiquette we must do before...”**

**“I know, we must bow and ask for a ride first,” the small child told a startled Amanda. She wiggled out of Amanda’s arms and ran over in front of Lady Elise. She bowed low and asked for a ride. Lady Elise chuckled loudly and the child ran back to Amanda.**

**“She said she would be delighted to give me a ride!”**

*That’s exactly what Lady Elise said, thought Amanda. Amazing child!*

**She picked up Celeste and climbed up on Lady Elise. She placed Celeste right in front of her, so she could hold her during the flight. Amanda tied a scarf onto Celeste’s head, and wrapped a blanket around her. “It gets very cold up there,” she explained. They turned and waved good-bye to the assembled throng of people; Antoinette and Henri were in the front row waving vigorously. Lady Elise stood up and took a leap and they were airborne. Essex followed right behind her. They went directly up to the thermals and were soon lost from sight.**

**Down below Jacques started barking out orders. “All right everyone, back to your chores. We have to fortify this place and prepare for war!”**

He turned and wistfully looked up towards the way the dragons went, *Bon chance my sweet Celeste!*

7

Adam was flying sentry duty over the bay area when one of the albatrosses flew by warning him that something was coming out of the thermals above. Adam called to Lady Arian and warned her of the approach. She and Lady Emily were in the air in seconds and joined Adam. They hovered and watched, as the dragons got closer.

Suddenly Lady Arian shouted in alarm, *it is Essex and Lady Elise. Vail had been badly injured and they bring him here to safety.*

They flew up to greet them and Adam was surprised as he approached Lady Elise to see a small curly haired child waving to him. He smiled and waved back, and watched as the little girl laughed and giggled.

They landed on the plateau and Adam went immediately to Essex. Amanda jumped down off of Lady Elise and joined him. Essex lowered himself again and they climbed up on his wing and went to Vail. He was in obvious pain now, and had already undone his harness.

“Get me off of here,” begged Vail sweating profusely, “the pain is too much!”

They lifted him over the ridge and carefully carried him down and off Essex. He was in agony, as his leg dragged behind him. They laid him down on the ground and looking up he said, “Hello Adam, how’s everything here,” and promptly fainted.

“We need to get him to the clinic. I have to release his leg from the tight bindings,” Amanda told him.

“You all go to the clinic; I’ll bring him to you,” Adam offered. “It will be quicker this way.”

Amanda went to Lady Elise and helped Celeste climb off. She bowed to Essex and then she and Emily and the child hurried down the path to the clinic. Celeste turned and watched as Adam bent over Vail and lifted him in his strong arms. He spread his wings to their maximum and took off down towards the town. He landed just as they arrived and flung open the door.

They carried him in and placed him on one of the beds. Amanda immediately began to undo the binding on his leg. Adam removed his flight jacket and helmet. Amanda removed all of the bindings and Adam could now see the wound. He was appalled at the size of the burn, and the red streaks that were snaking their way up his leg.



**“Good Lord, how did this happen? This is a very serious burn,” he said solemnly.**

**“There was a fight, Vail tried to shield Essex from a flame to his face. Adam, he took the full brunt of the flame. The doctor told me that there was severe nerve damage. He may not have the use of his leg once it heals.” She redressed the wound and replaced the bandage around it. “Let him sleep for now.” Emily led Amanda out of the clinic and they all went to the café. She brewed some tea and they sat and talked. Amanda recounted what had occurred and all that had happened since. She then told them about little Celeste, and why she was with them.**

**While all this was going on Celeste sat quietly, taking everything in. She listened carefully, and several times smiled at Adam. He found her enchanting. Then Adam made a face at her and she replied in kind; they both had a little war of the faces.**

**Emily got up and went to the kitchen and returned with some juice and fruit for Celeste, and a stern look for Adam. Celeste thanked her amid giggles and daintily ate, savoring each bite.**

**“I am so worried about his leg. I just don’t know how all this is going to sit with him.” Emily could see that Amanda was very tired; the constant worry was taking its toll on her. She needed to get some rest too.**

**Little Celeste broke into their conversation, “Excuse me Lady Amanda, but why don’t you ask the Shaman to look at Uncle Vail’s wound? He will know what to do for him.”**

**Emily and Adam looked at the child in stunned amazement. Amanda told them, “This is why little Celeste is here with us. Oh, and she speaks to the dragons also - all of them! She is full of surprises.”**

**Adam smiled at her; “she has a point Amanda; if anyone would know how to treat a burn like this, it would be the Shaman.”**

**“Amanda, we will inform the Shaman that he is needed.” Emily assured her, “You need to rest, I can tell that you have not rested since this happened, have you?” Amanda nodded. “You cannot make any decisions right now. There is a bed right next to Vail. You go and remove your coat and riding gear and take a little nap. We will look to Vail’s needs.”**

**“Perhaps just a little nap,” replied a very tired Amanda. Less than ten minutes later, she was sound asleep.**

**They stepped outside the clinic and Emily started to make her plans. “I’ll have Lady Elise call the Shaman and tell him about Vail’s injury and ask for his help. He will come and help I am sure.” Turning to Celeste, Emily smiled and said, “Now, what are we to do with you?”**

**“I can go with Adam to your garden,” she said and smiled a big toothy grin.**

**Adam piped up quickly, “I can show her around and explain everything to her.”**

**“My sweet love, I doubt that you have to explain anything to Celeste,” Emily said as she looked down at the child and smiled, “right Celeste?” She bent and kissed the child as she giggled and nodded. Emily left them and headed towards the plateau.**

Adam tickled her and picked up and put her on his shoulder as she squealed with delight. Adam asked, "Are you ready little one?" She answered by slipping her arms around his neck and holding on tightly.

Adam spread his wings and lifted slowly; he banked to the left and headed towards Emily's house. As he flew over the jungle canopy, it suddenly came alive with song. Birds of all sizes and colors came up out of the canopy singing in jubilation. He noted as he landed on the plateau in back of Emily's house, many more of the colorful jungle birds spreading their wings and greeting Celeste with song. She twirled around with her hands in the air singing along with them. Thousands of butterflies took to the air and descended all about her as she danced, following her with a display of their own. Celeste squealed with delight and it seemed to Adam's eyes that she was emitting a bright light of her own. Adam was surprised by the birds' and butterflies display and was trying to understand why they were behaving so.

*They all seem genuinely ecstatic that the child is here. Why is this? What is happening here?*

The birds kept shouting, "The light is here! The child is here!"

The two large huskies bounded out of the jungle and rushed up to Celeste. Greeting them with hugs she threw herself across their backs giggling. And then Thor stepped out of the jungle and came to her. She stopped and turned to him and bowed, saying something in his ear. The wolf threw his head back and howled loudly. The falcons flew above her keening in exultation. Not understanding, Adam asked the birds why they were so excited.

*Because you bring us the child of light, he was told. She is the future; it means we have a future.* They broke into song again and the child sang with them. Her small voice filled him with joy. Several minutes later Adam explained to her that he had to return to his duties. He told Celeste he was going to be gone for a few hours. He told her to make herself at home; there was food in the house in case she was hungry. She told him not to worry; she would be just fine here with all these new friends. She would see him later at the clinic when the Shaman arrived. Then she giggled and threw herself on the two large dogs and began rolling about.

Adam flew to his post and began to patrol the area again. Suddenly he realized that Hannah didn't know what had happened. He called to Lady Arian and she calmly informed him that she had already told Lady Vesta the news. She and Lady Hannah were on their way back to the Bay. Lady Arian also told Adam that the Shaman said he would come this afternoon and examine Vail's wound.

On the other side of the world Valotin was chasing a small band of tattered wretches to their doom. Valotin knew NaTas was throwing everything he had at them to slow them down. He didn't want them catching up to him before he had his entire force ready. Little did he realize that this was great exercise for the new recruits; they were honing their skills on these poor devils.

Valotin informed James and the other riders of Vail's condition. *He is now at Dragon's Bay, he will be much safer there and the Shaman will attend to him. If anyone can save Vail's leg – it will be the Shaman.*

A large brown and white falcon dropped down out of the heights and flew their way with a message attached to its chest. It flew over Valotin and released the message into James' waiting hands. He opened it and read it in his mind so all would hear it at once.

*It's from Lady Dee. My friends, the black brute is preparing to attack the mountain fortress. He knows that it will draw you all back there and he will be waiting to ambush you. He plans to do this a lot. He is trying to wear you down and then attack with his full force and take you out. The arrogant fool does not yet know your true strength. On a side note, they have not fed in a long time, and they are now openly complaining about it.*

*Hold on a moment.... one of the buzzards just informed me that he heard them mention something about Machu Picchu. NaTas has hidden troops there somewhere. He is sending his second to retrieve them and bring them back. I must get this off. Lady Dee*

Ichor spoke first; Valotin, *one of us needs to take out this force immediately. We cannot allow them to join up with NaTas.*

*Why do you not go then, answered Valotin, your forces are looking forward to a good fight. This would provide them a chance to use the skills that they have learned.*

*Agreed Valotin, I was just being polite. My people are itching to try out their skills in a fight with the devils.*

Ichor called his dragons to attention and gave them their orders. They could hardly contain their glee as they headed above towards the Thermals.

Valotin watched his brother until he reached the thermals and was whisked away, *God's speed my brother.*

He then called to Dragon Bay, *Lady Arian, Lady Vesta a quick word... there has been a change in plans.*

Less than an hour later Ichor descended from the thermals and immediately contacted Lady Vesta and Hannah. *Do not show yourselves, I am just letting you know that we are here. We go to rid this land of its blight. How goes it with Vail?*

Hannah answered immediately; *the Shaman is with him now. I will let you know what he says when he is finished.* Hannah was standing in the doorway to the clinic, watching the Shaman. Little Celeste was sitting on the floor between the two large huskies. Hannah was still in awe of this exceptional child.

When she had returned to camp the child was on the plateau waiting for her. Hannah was glad that Emily had told her about Celeste. Still she wasn't quite prepared. Celeste rushed forward and threw her arms around Lady Vesta as if she were an old friend. They chatted away for several minutes and then she had come to Hannah and introduced herself. She said she was very excited to meet Hannah. Hannah smiled in surprise and very soon found herself taken by this beautiful bubbly child. To her amazement, she found that her wolf, Thor, followed the child wherever she went. Celeste had told her that he was her protector and he was very happy that she had saved him and brought him to Dragons Bay. After discussing this aspect with Emily and Adam, they decided that it was probably a good idea. The large animal would protect her with its life from anything that could cause her harm.

Vail's leg had swollen to twice its size. There were some ugly red streaks making their way up his thigh, a sure sign of infection. The Shaman finished his examination and turned to Amanda.

"The burn is a very deep one. The flame burned through the layers of skin and attacked the nerves and muscle. It will have to heal from the inside out if the nerves are to regenerate properly. I have the herbs to make the salve that will be needed, but it is the worms I need that we must find."

"Worms? What worms? Shouted Vail in disgust. "You're not putting worms on me old man!"

"Vail, knock it off this minute," said a stern looking Amanda. "Get a hold of yourself. At least hear him out; in these matters he knows what he's talking about. He's been taking care of these people for years."

The Shaman turned and faced Vail and sternly said, "Young rider, listen to me. If I do nothing you will never walk again." The Shaman waited for this to sink in and then continued, "your leg will be useless; just something to drag behind you. Is this what you want?" Vail shook his head back and forth.

**“What about the salve the doctor sent back with you?” asked Adam, “Didn’t he give you instructions on how to care for Vail?”**

**Amanda turned towards the nearby table and picked up the salve. She handed it to the Shaman. He opened it and brought it to his nose and sniffed. “Poison,” he spat out the word making an ugly face and threw the container in the trash basket.**

**“Hey,” yelled Vail, “I need that!”**

**“It is made from chemicals; it does nothing to promote healing, it suffocates the tissue.” He turned to Amanda, “Is this what you want?”**

**“No of course not, we will do what you say,” she stared sternly at Vail, “whatever you say.”**

**The Shaman walked to the water basin and washed his hands. Drying his hands he turned and explained further.**

**“Listen to me, I know you are people of the world, but you know nothing of the earth and how she gives to us.” He sat on the chair by Vail’s bed and they gathered around him. “This rainforest,” he raised his hands in the air, “she provides all we need to survive. She gives us the food we need to sustain our bodies; and also provides for us when we are ill or injured. You simply need to know where to look. There is a particular worm that exists near the river areas. This is what we must find. The worm lays its eggs in dead carcasses, and when they hatch they are like little maggots. They eat away at dead tissue. But, and this is important, they also deposit a small amount of saliva in the tissue as they feed. We have found that this fluid causes the damaged areas to regenerate. It is a slow process, but I have done this before on one of our warriors, and I assure you, it works.”**

**The three riders stood there staring at the Shaman in stunned silence. Amanda was the first to speak, “what do you need us to do?”**

**“Your dragons feed on the large heard to the north of us, is this not so?” He asked and they nodded quickly. “Would they be willing to kill a large beast and leave it by the riverbed so it will attract what we need?”**

**“I see no problem there. Essex will gladly do anything to help Vail.” Amanda told him.**

**The Shaman turned and went to Adam, “It is you who will be the one to gather the eggs. Your great ability to fly will be the determining factor here. We must gather as many eggs as possible and bring them here quickly before they hatch. They do not last long when removed from a carcass, so you will have to hurry once you gather them.”**

**Adam quickly answered him, “I can do this. Believe me; you haven’t seen speed till you see what I can do. I’ll have them here in minutes.”**

**“Excellent. Now understand, the carcass will attract all kinds of parasites, it is the way of the rainforest. You will be looking for a long white snakelike slug. It will come out of the mud near the riverbank. They generally come in pairs. It would be better if there were many, but do not wait too long once they lay their eggs. You will know this has been done when they leave the carcass and return to the earth.”**

Celeste rose and walked over to the Shaman. Looking up, she turned her head to the side and smiled sweetly saying, “Do not worry, you will save his leg, Healer. And there are others things you will do too; but that is for the future.”

The Shaman looked at the small child closely, as if seeing her for the first time. He placed his hand on her head and knelt down and studied Celeste with a furrowed brow. Recognition suddenly dawned on him and, eyes wide in surprise, he exclaimed, “You are the Child of Light!” The riders stared at him in surprise. Celeste giggled and nodded.

“I am honored little one; I never thought I would live to see such a wondrous thing.” He bowed his head low to her, and she put her little hands around his neck and hugged him. Then she was off in a flash running out the door down to the beach laughing and giggling; the great wolf, Thor, running after her.

As they watched her go, Adam turned to the Shaman, “who is she, and what is this Child of Light that you and all the forest speaks of?”

The Shaman smiled, “she is the future; what the future generations will be.”

His eyes were shining brightly as he continued. “She heralds the coming of the new era. Ancient prophecy, handed down by mouth from Shaman to Shaman since the beginning of my people says: ‘When the land is purified with fire, good and evil will battle for the earth. The messengers of the Gods will appear; he who is lost will be found; and the Child of Light will step forward. The battle will be won and peace will fill the land.’ I believe that this is what is happening now.”

They all stood there and stared as the sky opened up and a beam of sunlight found its way across the jungle to bathe itself on Celeste, standing on the shore. She was indeed a child of light.

“I’m beginning to think that you are right.” Vail said weakly from the bed. “Look at everything that has happened. The burning of the earth, it was really a cleansing, so to speak. And now we fight the evil ones to save what is left. If the dragons aren’t messengers I don’t know who is...” He moved slightly and his face curled in great pain. He looked at them, “Guys, I don’t know how much more of this pain I can take.” Vail looked at the Shaman in resignation, “Please, do what you can, I’ll agree to anything you say.”

The Shaman took a small pouch out of his pocket and asked Amanda for a cup of water. He opened the bag and they saw it was filled with an herb. He sprinkled just a pinch into the cup and stirred it. He went to Vail and told him to drink it; it would ease the pain. Vail took the cup and hesitantly drank.

“Ok, we have work to do,” said Amanda to Emily and Adam. “I’ll tell Lady Elise what we need to be done and she will relay it to Essex. Adam, you go with Essex, he’ll happily provide you with your carcass.”

“Hey doc, this stuff is great! I feel wonderful!” Shouted Vail to the startled group. They turned around and stared at the wounded dragon rider who looked at them with a silly grin on his face. “Wow, what’s in...” Vail dropped the cup and fell back on the pillow unconscious.

“Not to worry, he will sleep restfully now,” said the Shaman. “Fear not Lady Amanda; it will not interfere with his connection to his dragon. Now I must go and prepare what I need; I will return shortly. It is going to be a long night.” He nodded slightly to the riders and left the clinic heading towards the jungle.

Hannah went outside and called to Ichor, informing him of all that had transpired. He was very interested in what the Shaman had said about their prophecies, and he questioned her in detail about the child. When Hannah told him that her wolf, Thor, would not leave the child's side he let out a long guttural *aaah... it has come at last!*

He asked Hannah to keep him informed and then broke the connection wishing them well. He immediately relayed all this to Valotin.

## 8

The White soared over a small mountaintop and glided to Valotin's side asking how Vail was doing. Valotin told him what Hannah had said and added, *if the prophecy of the Shaman is to be believed, we may truly be in the end times. The wolf, Thor, follows the child as protector.*

*There is more at play here than you know my friend, the White said cryptically, for Seth, for the world, and even possibly for me as well.*

A deep chuckle filled the night as Valotin answered him, *and Lady Vesta?* The White jerked his head up and stared at his friend. *Yes, my friend, said Valotin nodding, I have eyes to see.*

*Apparently you have very good eyes, the White continued, I did not know it was you who would 'see'. He sighed deeply; it is rather ironic that it will all rest on one small act of a soul-damaged human. But then again Valotin, it was one small act that began all this. And in all the times this has played out, never have all the signs come together like this; it gives me hope.*

*Yes my friend, hope is what keeps us all going. I plan on informing James and Elizabeth of all this tomorrow. They have a right to know exactly what the stakes are; that is the difference between this time and all the others. Valotin rose up and looked out over his sleeping troops. They are much like the soul mates of old.*

*That is one job I am glad I do not have; the White replied hissing. Seth knows everything and you see what trouble he can be. I love him as a son, but sometimes he drives me to exasperation. Having an entire squad to contend with would tax me to the limit.*

*There is a difference; Seth is a damaged soul, touched by the black. Valotin added quickly, and he will feel that touch again; we both know this.*

*He is more prepared this time, the White quickly came to his defense; his heart has softened because of the woman. For the first time he sees a chance for a possible future and he is embracing it. The White turned to Valotin, he had two opportunities to take her, and he did not. She is unaffected by his ability; seeing this, he made the conscious decision not to touch her against her will. He chose not to!*

*And when an unforeseen opportunity presented itself, one that would have held huge ramifications to all parties involved; he held himself in check. Now tell me that that is not self-control! No matter what the black throws at him, Seth will win this time.*

*We shall see my friend, we shall see,* said a somber Valotin.

Adam was true to his word. After Essex dropped the carcass of one of the water buffalos by the riverbank, Adam perched on a branch of a nearby tree and kept watch. Sure enough vultures came by to pluck out its eyes and open its belly. When they left other parasites came to feast. And finally Adam saw what he had been waiting for; six of the slug-like creatures came out of the mud and entered the carcass. He signaled to Lady Arian that the worms were entering the dead animal; it would not be long now.

While this was taking place the Shaman returned to the plateau in ceremonial garb and began a series of prayers. He lit several fires around a large flat boulder on the plateau and burned incense, which gave off a pungent odor. The smell drove the dragons off the plateau quickly. A sleepy Vail was brought to the altar stone by the women and placed on it.

Amanda, Emily and Hannah stood by to be of help if it was required. Adam returned with a large basket covered with leaves. Lifting the leaves, the Shaman found that Adam had cut out the entrails where the eggs had been laid and brought the entire thing, lest he lose any of them. The Shaman praised him for his forethought. Using a leaf, the Shaman scooped out the tiny white dots and gently covered Vail's wound with them. He then asked the riders to build up the fires and he added more incense. Soon the air was thick with smoke, the fumes seeped into everything including Vail's wound. The Shaman watched as the eggs began to move and wiggle; hatching, they quickly went about their task and burrowed into Vail's leg. Vail stirred and cried out once as the greedy little things began to purge his wound of the dead tissue and infected areas. He quieted after a bit and fell into a deep sleep. All night long the Shaman continued the ritual; adding more wood to the fire to build it up again and then throwing more incense to the flames. Sometime during the night, all of them fell into a deep sleep, laid out around the altar stone. By dawn there was a definite difference in Vail's leg. The swelling had gone down, and the dark red streaks that had begun to snake up his leg were no more.

The great dragons had spent the night circling above and keeping tabs on what was going on below. Essex was alarmed at first, not being able to feel Vail and then he realized that he was in a deep sleep; so deep in fact that it began to affect even him. Following an inner instinct, he found a small plateau and curled up and allowed himself to join Vail in sleep.

As the sun began to climb over the mountaintop, the small child made her way up to the plateau. She quietly tiptoed her way around the sleeping adults only stopping once to lay her hand on the head of the sleeping Shaman. She rose and made her way to the altar and climbed onto the great stone. She



carefully lifted the leaves that were covering Vail's leg and discarded them. Then she plunged her little hand into the wound all the way up to her elbow and came away with a handful of the wiggling, writhing mass. She stood and held them to the first rays of sunlight and they ceased all movement. She repeated this several times until there were no more.

She knelt beside Vail and placed her hands on his leg and concentrated. As the rays of the sun illuminated her little body a great blue-white light shot out from her and engulfed Vail. It lasted for thirty seconds or so and then was gone. Quietly she climbed down and retraced her steps around the sleeping riders, and headed off the plateau.

None were aware of what just took place, none except for Adam, watching high in a tree. As Celeste stepped down off the plateau, she turned and looked right up at him. Smiling she put her little finger to her lips and said, *Shh...* and giggled.

He smiled and nodded watching as she ran off to the beach with the great wolf, Thor, by her side.

## 9

Just outside of the port city of Bahia Blanca on the eastern coast of Argentina, a small inland village had once thrived. It had long been taken over by a large band of vicious marauders when they took over the entire area. These men had never been challenged by any of the burning devils, so they were smug in their false sense of security. Not one village had mounted a defense once they began their attacks. Their leader was an arrogant, vicious little man who thought his band of cutthroats was all-powerful. He would attack each village and take whatever he desired, especially women. He liked the young ones; the ones who had never known a man. Many young women were taken by his men and raped, and then forced into servitude. Anyone who opposed them was killed immediately.

Unknown to them, one of the starving black devils had stumbled onto their hidden camp and had returned and informed the others. Being very hungry they decided not wait any longer, they would feast on these humans and lay waste to their camp. They planned their attack well and decided that they would come just before dawn, when everyone was asleep. They hovered in anticipation for the coming dawn, salivating at the thought of food at last.

High above Terra Del Fuego, thirty dragons began a long slow spiral downward. Ichor's forces were aware that the black devils were somewhere in this area. They would find them and destroy them all before they could link up with the black bull. As they came closer to the rocky mountainous area, a large Harpy Eagle flew out and greeted them.

*Greetings! I salute Ichor of the Dragons of Light. He said excitedly, I come bearing news of great interest.*

*Greetings to a great and valued friend of the Dragons of Light, Ichor answered him politely. What news have you for us mighty one?*

*Puffed up by so grand a greeting, the great eagle spiraled up and then returned to Ichor. Those that you seek are on their way to attack a large band of evil men. These men are the twisted ones who attack the peaceful villages along the coast.*

*I would rather leave these men to their fate. Ichor said angrily, they choose to do these evil things and are no longer of any use to the world.*

*But Ichor, there are a lot of innocents in their camp. These people are their prisoners, Sarah reminded Ichor. Please, can we not try to save some of them?*

*My brave Sarah, I admire your desire to help them, but we cannot save everyone. We must choose carefully how we battle and when. There are two evils to consider here. Ichor further explained, if these men are as the ones we have run across before, they will have penned up the human captives in a cave and sealed its entrance. The black monsters will not harm these people. They will go after the ones out in the open. And these the world can do without.*

*A contrite Sarah apologized, I understand Ichor; forgive me for not trusting your judgment.*

*Nonsense Sarah, I count on your questioning me, he told her. It helps me to see all sides. Ichor now directed himself to the waiting eagle; can you lead us to where they are without them being aware of our presence? The eagle took off and the dragons followed from high above.*

Esteban roused himself from sleep; something had disturbed him, a noise perhaps? He looked about, the camp; all was quiet, nothing moved. He felt his body signal him, *ah, I have to pee, that is what woke me.* He was thinking it was a good thing he woke up before the boss found him asleep on guard duty. That would be most unpleasant. He headed into the jungle and found a clearing near the rocky wall of the mountains, where the captives were held. He unzipped his pants and began to urinate. He heard a scratching sound and stopped and looked about. Nothing! Ah, he had to get hold of himself; he was just too jumpy lately. He was heading back when he heard the *whoosh* of large wings; it was the last thing he heard. As he started to run for cover he was scooped up; and before he realized it, dead, as he was swallowed whole down the throat of a large black dragon. Not a sound had been made.

The black dragon soared high above the rocky mountain and chuckled to his waiting friends. *See what I can do!* He chided them.

Emboldened by their fellow dragon, the black force swept down on the sleeping camp and attacked. A long streak of flame cut through the camp and circled it. This would ensure that the sleeping men would run into the opening to get away from the flames. Then the black dragons would dive in and scoop them up; an easy meal.

Loud screams and sounds of gunfire awoke their leader, Ricardo. He dashed out half dressed to see his camp in flames and dragons swooping down and taking his men. He knew it meant instant death if he went into the open.

*They are running about like fools; attracting attention to themselves, he thought calculating the odds of his survival. Several of his men ran for him.*

“No, no! Go away! You draw attention here you fools.” They were screaming and begging him to save them. He quickly slit the throat of one, and gutted the other. Then he stepped back and blended into the jungle.

*Let them feast on those fat pigs, he thought to himself. I am not about to become food for those vermin. I know how to take care of myself. I was born in this jungle, and lived all my life off the land. Let them all die, he thought, I can always build up another force. This is merely a small setback. He ran deeper into the forest, away from the screaming sounds of his men. Next time I will be better prepared, he thought. Perhaps the cities were a better place to camp. Hidden in all those buildings, they would not be able to*

find him so easily there. Yes, he would go to the city. The people that were left there were weak, he would overpower them easily, and build up his forces again.

There was a small clearing up ahead, and then the jungle closed in again. It had a thicker canopy to shield him from the eyes of those beasts. He waited and listened, the dragons were still at his camp; *lots of nice fat men to eat*. They would be kept busy chasing them. He calculated that they would be too busy to notice one man running across the small clearing. He listened again, no sound of any dragon on wing nearby. He looked above, but the canopy didn't give him a clear view. He would have to chance it.

*Ah, what am I worried about, he thought, I am a survivor. I have outlasted the best of them. You have to take what you want in this world, and no dragon is going to stop me now.* He rushed out into the open and headed for the other side.

What Ricardo didn't know was that he had been seen when he left the camp. Not by just any dragon, but by the very same dragon that had just feasted on Esteban. This particular dragon loved to play cat and mouse. And right now Ricardo was a nice, big, fat mouse, just waiting to be plucked up.

The dragon had quietly been following Ricardo and knew he was just below the jungle canopy. He had caught glimpses of him every now and then; just enough to whet his appetite and keep him on the trail.

As Ricardo ran he heard the *whoosh* of dragon wings in his ear. *No! This cannot be!*

He ran with all his might, but he wasn't fast enough. You see Ricardo had been lazy these past six months. He had stuffed himself with food as he watched others starve. He had drunk himself unconscious almost every night. In his arrogance and contempt for the poor people of this area, he had become a large, fat, over bearing pig of a man. As he closed on the jungle he began to think he was going to make it. Relief began to set in when he was suddenly scooped up in the mouth of the black dragon. Screaming and kicking like a little boy, he met his end in the acidic belly of the large black beast.

Ichor's forces were waiting on the other side of the mountain ridge. The large eagle was sitting on the rim watching what was happening below. *They have killed all the evil ones my liege.* The great eagle told Ichor, *they smell the innocents in the cave. Now is the time to strike!*

Ichor's forces swept over the ridge and attacked the startled dragons below. The great Harpy Eagle watched in fascination as Ichor's forces obliterated the unaware monsters.

There were at least forty of them; no match for Ichor's seasoned dragons and riders. They swept in on them from both sides cutting them down. Flames were flying in all directions, and black dragons were falling to their doom.

Andre and Anastasia were fighting as a team. Their dragons were flying almost back to back as they were destroying dragons all along a path they cut towards the cave below. Their job was to see to it that no dragon came near the innocent people held in the cave. And they did their job very well.

The huddled groups of people inside the cave were witnesses to the battle above. They began to notice the differences in the fighting dragons. And then they saw the riders on their backs and they began to cheer. Many of the villages had heard tales of a mighty force of good dragons hidden in the jungle far

away. None knew if these tales were true, or just the silly stories of crazed men. Now, before them, they saw the truth and it filled them all with hope once again.

The last of the dragons fell and Ichor checked his forces for injuries. None had even a scratch; it was a job well done. The great Harpy Eagle flew above exalting Ichor and his mighty force. Ichor sent Juztin to flame the carcasses to dust before he attended to the people.

Sarah addressed her riders and praised them on a well-fought battle. She reminded them of her teachings, and now they did indeed see how important the link between them and their dragons was; it made all the difference in battle.

When Juztin completed his task and returned, Ichor and his queen landed. Sarah and Jackson went to the cave and released the people. They were overjoyed and thanked Sarah and Jackson for their deliverance. Ichor and his forces left to a cheering crowd on the ground below. Each dragon and rider was feeling pretty good as they headed into the thermals and back to a waiting Valotin.

The tides were changing, and this was just the beginning.

When NaTas's second in command reached the jungle he found no trace of the force that was supposed to be waiting there. He searched all along the coastline. He went to Machu Picchu and backtracked down to the tip of the continent. Nothing! When he could wait no longer he headed back to tell his master the bad news. He dreaded doing so knowing that NaTas would be enraged and in all probability, kill him.

On the other side of the world Valotin and Ichor were chuckling loudly at the poor creature's dilemma. Had they known, they would not have been laughing. For when his second in command returned and told the bull his news, he did not fly into a rage. NaTas was silent for a long time, pacing back and forth deep in thought.

Then he hissed in a vile low voice:

*They theeink to trrrriick meeee. Ha! They have reevealed their hiiidding place. Now we knooowww where to strriiike. We are going to pay a surrrpriiisssse visit to our sainnttly brothers!* Looking at his second in command he screeched... *Recall all our ffoorrcces! Gather everyone to usssss.* His second called to four dragons and quickly instructed them where to go.

NaTas was furious; he ranted and raged for a half hour about how they thought to trick him. He began to think, to put everything together in his twisted mind. He began to add things up, and didn't like the picture he was getting. NaTas had seen his plans thwarted at every turn in recent weeks. Each time he planned an attack, either Ichor's forces showed up; or Alakar's forces blocked their way. He had been effectively prevented from feeding his dragons. Now at last, with the prize almost in view, he began to think clearly again and he suddenly understood why. *Of course! I find it a bit too coincidental that they show up every place we go; there has to be a spy!*

Watching from high above, Lee Chin felt the hairs on his neck stand up. NaTas had just slowly raised his large head, and appeared to be looking right at him.

*They must have a spy somewhere nearby;* he hissed as he raised his head and scanned the rocky ceiling above. *You, you, and you, to the sidewalls,* he ordered three young dragons. *Begin scanning till you reach the top. Look into every crack, every fissure, and every hole no matter how small.* He slithered outside the large cavern and looked at the side of the mountain. *Up there, near the top, what is up there?*

Two dragons scrambled up towards the small opening that led to Lee Chins hiding ground. Akera was one of them. Seeing what was happening, the buzzards descended to the small opening, and began to squawk loudly as the dragons approached.

*They have a nesting ground in the rock; it is an old one, used for many seasons.*

Akera continued on around the mountain pretending to check different openings in the rock. When he turned back his eyes flew wide in alarm. NaTas was at the opening, and he was digging furiously with a mad glint in his eye.

*I smell a trick, I smell a human!*

Lying about him were the remains of the buzzards; he had killed them all. The black suddenly screamed; *Aha!*

Akera rushed him, talons at the ready.

## 10

Some days later, Vail was soaking in the warm waters of Dragons Bay. Each day since his injury he went to the water as the Shaman had instructed and spent hours just soaking and slowly moving his injured leg up and down in the water. Gradually feeling was coming back in his leg. The reason he knew this was because the day before he thought he felt a little fish bump his leg. Not wanting to give Amanda false hope, he had said nothing. Today, he was sure of it. Just now as he entered the water he had felt a rock under his foot. The sensation was so wonderful, that Vail had nearly wept tears of relief. He was going to be able to fly again!

Picking up on his riders distress Essex had called to him. *Vail, are you all right? What has happened my friend?*

Vail told him and continued further, *I admit that in itself it is not a big thing. But Essex, I actually felt something! My leg is healing; the nerves are regenerating just as the Shaman said they would.*

Essex flew to the bay and dove into the water swimming to his rider. He was overjoyed to see him his old self once again. Vail swam to his large friend and holding on, Essex pulled him about the bay.

Lady Elise called to Amanda and told her to go to the bay; she might like what she sees there.

Amanda ran down to the beach and was thrilled at what she saw. Vail was swimming with Essex, they were splashing each other, and he was laughing loudly. It had been so long since she had seen him like this; she was overwhelmed and her emotions got the better of her.

*Vail, Lady Amanda is on the beach; she is crying.* Concerned, Essex asked, *is there something wrong?*

Essex circled around and Vail was able to look towards the beach and saw Amanda there. He swam to the shore and slowly made his way to her.

“Amanda?” She looked up at him smiling and crying at the same time. He sat beside her and took her hand in his tenderly, “Amanda, tell me, what is wrong?”

**“Oh Vail!” She stammered thru her tears, “It... it has been so long since I heard you laugh. It was so wonderful to see you... you and Essex... out there together again.” She buried her face against his chest.**

**Smiling, Vail held her close patting her shoulder, “Oh my sweet, everything is going to be all right.”**

**That evening Vail showed Amanda just how much feeling had returned to his leg and elsewhere. It had been a long time since he had felt anything; this night he corrected the situation much to the surprise and delight of Lady Amanda. She had been beside him all thru this ordeal and now he showed her how much he appreciated her.**

**Throughout the night, deep chuckling could be heard coming from the dragons.**

**Essex called and informed Valotin the good news about Vail and the return of feeling to his leg. Valotin was very pleased for them both. He knew his First Wing was itching to return to do battle. As soon as the connection was broken, Valotin called to the Shaman and thanked him for his tireless effort in returning Vail the use of his leg. He told him that he would be entered into the Dragon Chronicles as a great healer and a friend to all Dragon kind. The Shaman humbly accepted the great honor that Valotin accorded him.**

**When the other riders and dragons were informed of Vail’s great progress there were cheers from both. All had been worried about Vail, but none more so than James. He openly admitted to Valotin just how worried he had been.**

***I didn’t want to burden you with it so I said nothing. This news is wonderful for Vail and especially for Essex.***

***Things are occurring, as they should James. Valotin told his friend. You should have told me of your great concern, I would have put you at ease. Forgive me for not thinking about your feelings.***

***James leaned over and hugged the neck of his mighty companion; you have enough on your mind Valotin. And you owe me no apology. I should have trusted that you had things under control.***

***Since we have the rogue on the run, and we are in the area, I suggest that we all adjourn to the Mountain fortress for some down time. Valotin suggested.***

***I am sure that Jacques will be very happy to see us, added James.***

**Valotin called ahead and asked Jacques if his men could spend the night in his fortress.**

**He was greeted warmly and Jacques insisted saying, *by all means, come, come. You always have a place here at Dragons Valley. Do you like the name we have given this place? It is our way of honoring you and your mighty dragons and riders.***

*We are honored that you think of us as your friends, Jacques. We do not want to put you out; we do carry our own food and water.* Valotin told him.

*Nonsense! The dark rogues have not bothered us since you were last here. We have plenty.* Laughing Jacques told him, *you and your riders are our guests, I insist!*

*Jacques my friend, you do not realize, there are three squadrons of dragons and riders with me. That is ninety men and dragons!* Valotin waited for his reaction.

*Mon Dieu, that large? Ah well, we will find the room!* Jacques was thinking as he was speaking to Valotin, *Come! Come, I will not turn you away.*

Alakar flew to Valotin and asked, *Valotin perhaps I could take my force to Dragons Bay. The thermals will bring us here in mere minutes if we are needed. You know my riders have a strong connection to Vail. It will do him, and them, good to see each other. What say you?*

*Sound thinking my friend, Valotin replied, make it so. We shall keep in constant contact. There can be no chance for error now. I shall keep four dragons in the air to patrol at all times. I suggest you do the same; you never know.*

Valotin called ahead and let Essex know that he was going to have guests. Alakar was coming for a quick visit. Essex was delighted and quickly informed Vail. The women were excited and opened the grand kitchen in the café to prepare a feast for their fellow riders. Realizing that they knew nothing about preparing a meal for the large group they quickly sent news to the Shaman and asked him to send Lady Mai and her staff back to the camp.

An hour later the diminutive little lady came in like a whirlwind, issuing orders, and opening the large freezer; getting all her cooking gear out of the boxes she had packed them in. She knew that Terry would be coming and she wanted to prepare a feast for him. Although she never said a word, she had been worried sick about her young friend, and now her heart soared at the prospect of seeing him again.

It was little Celeste who picked up on the fear that Lady Mai had been going thru. She called to Valotin and told him of her great concern for the one called Terry; and how she had keep it inside so the others would not worry about her. Valotin told her not to worry, he would take care of it. He called to Alakar and asked permission to address Terry privately. Terry's eyes flew wide when Valotin addressed him and informed him of all that had occurred. Terry assured Valotin that he would personally go to her and put her mind at ease.

Alakar's great force came out of the thermals and spiraled down towards the plateau. Emily and Amanda and Hannah were waiting there to greet the riders as they dismounted. Adam flew high to salute them with some aerobics of his own. All the dragons were very excited and there were great roars of approval and everyone was in a happy mood. They landed on the plateau and the women were greeted with hugs and kisses. All asked where Vail was, and upon learning he was down in the café they rushed down the pathway. They stopped short when they saw him standing in the doorway.

Being Vail, he stood by the doorway in his casual way and then attempted to walk to the top step to greet them. His steps were slow, and halting, and painful. He managed all the way to the landing before he had to stop. There were cheers and shouts of 'hooray for you!', and then they scooped him up and dragged him inside.

Terry went into the café and looked quickly about, not seeing Lady Mai, he went around back into the kitchen. As he opened the door there she was, stirring a pot of sauce. He sauntered into the kitchen and came up behind her and whispered in her ear, “Hell woman, that’s no way to stir a sauce.”

She turned around eyes wide at the sight of him. He picked her up in his arms laughing, and swung her around in a giant bear hug. When he put her down he leaned in and kissed her cheek. For the first time in her reserved life, Lady Mai threw caution to the wind and grabbed him and kissed him back, eyes full of tears. She held him to her tightly and then let go.

“My sweet Terry, you look well.” She said pinching his arm, “a little thin perhaps, but wonderful to these old eyes.”

“I missed you too sweet lady.” He said hugging her again. “Now, tell me what I can do to help.”

Sean sauntered into the kitchen and smiled broadly, seeing them together. He walked up to Lady Mai and kissed her on the cheek and gave her big hug.

“This man has been driving me crazy with worry for you. I am glad to see that you are well Lady Mai.” He laughingly told her.

“Both of you go out and enjoy your friends company. Vail will be looking for you, I can do this. Go! Go!” She insisted as she pushed them out the door. A few minutes later Terry went back and peeked in and saw her crying over her sauce.

He walked up to her and took her hands in his. “My sweet Lady Mai, please do not cry. I will be all right; it is you that I worry about.” He told her softly, “Never have I had anyone who cared for me as you do; except for Sean. You are the light of my life dear lady, and I will not have you crying for me.”

She wiped her eyes and looked at him, “silly boy, these are tears of joy!” Smiling sweetly, she looked at him, “If ever I had a son, he would be just like you... vain and demanding, but an excellent chef! Ha, ha! Now go to your friends and leave this old lady to the cooking.” Terry kissed her again and went out to the main café feeling a lot better about her. Lady Mai was thrilled that he cared for her so much.

Loud laughter coming from the café could be heard late into the night. Stories were told, and embellished upon, and retold, again and again. They regaled Vail with tales of the fleeing black dragons.

Before returning to Dragons Bay, Peter had been approached by Seth and asked to take a message to Hannah. “It’s not what you’re thinking fly boy. Just tell her I’m still here, and I remember.”

Alakar had quickly whispered to Peter; *tell him you will do this. Their connection must be strengthened.*

When Peter asked to speak to Hannah privately, she was puzzled. Then he told her he had a message from Seth. Her face lit up in a smile and her eyes came alive at the mention of Seth’s name. Peter had seen the same reaction when Seth spoke of Hannah. He was beginning to understand. He quickly gave her his message and watched as her smile became almost sensual in nature.

When she spoke to him, her voice was low and husky. “Tell him, I burn with the memory. I will be here, waiting.”



He left her on the porch to the café and went inside. Before rejoining the others he notified Alakar of her message to Seth. Alakar said he would relay it to Seth.

*Alakar, Peter asked, are they a couple?*

*Not yet, and it must remain that way for now. Seth must develop a strong desire for her; yet willingly hold himself back. Alakar informed Peter. It is complicated, but he has a choice to make before they can consummate their union. And all our fates will depend on that choice. Now go and enjoy yourself my friend.*

The rest of the evening was loud and riotous with the riders enjoying themselves immensely. They all knew that that they were coming to the end of the chase. It would not be long before they would meet up with the black bull and the final battle would begin. So they threw caution to the wind and had a good time.

Several couples slipped down to the beach for some skinny-dipping and lovemaking. Others went to the waterfall, and its many secluded areas. Dawn found sleeping couples all along the beach, and by the waterfall, and in various houses in the town.

Alakar awoke them loudly with a call to arms.

## 11

A continent away, Valotin and his large force were on the prowl; they had not seen any sign of the black dragons for hours. Valotin began to have a bad feeling - something was amiss; the tide had changed again somehow. The White returned and flew to his side.

*Nothing! We find no sign anywhere.* The White told him in an agitated voice.

Alakar had passed Hannah's message on to James and asked that he give it to Seth personally at the first opportunity. While Valotin and the White spoke, James leaned over to Seth.

"I have a message for you Seth, from Hannah." James watched Seth's face light up in anticipation. She says and I quote, 'Tell him I burn with the memory...I will be here, waiting.' That's all I was told."

James watched as Seth's eyes took on a fiery look and he smiled in a knowing way.

"Thanks James, that's all I needed to hear." Seth now concentrated on the conversation of the two large dragons.

A loud keening brought them all to attention. Lee Chin's dragon, Akera, was approaching at a very fast pace, he was covered in scratches and bloodied. As they watched they realized that Lee Chin was slumped over his dragon's neck. Akera called in alarm, *Valotin, the Black knows of your camp.*

Lee Chin was covered in blood and badly injured, his breathing shallow. He reached out to James and grabbed his arm squeezing it. He was in obvious pain but he forced himself to speak with Valotin. *He knows now where we hide in Dragons Bay. He makes war with all his forces, Valotin. He plans to catch you off guard. He guessed that there was a spy; he hunted till he found me; tried to kill me. He was insane with rage; if not for Akera, I would be dead.*

Valotin immediately called to Alakar and warned him not to leave Dragons Bay. He told him of the approaching force of black devils. *Get the people to cover and secure the area. Place the child in Adam's care. We should be there in thirty minutes.*

Valotin turned to Elliott and Lazar; *please escort Lee Chin and Akeru to the mountain fortress. Ask for their physician to minister to him. Return to Dragons Bay when you are finished.*

He then called to Lady Ankara, *My lady, it time for you to leave that place, your riders mate has been badly injured and you are in possible danger. Both of you get out quickly and flee to the mountain fortress you will see in my minds eye.*

*I see it Valotin, she answered quickly. Lady Dee and I shall leave immediately.*

Meanwhile, back at Dragons Bay, Alakar called to his riders and dragons and informed them of the news from Valotin. A loud bugling roar called them to arms, to war! Everyone ran for their gear and their dragons.

After much shouting and arguing, Reggie and Sean helped Vail to the plateau. He managed to climb on Essex by himself and took his seat. Vail called to his lifetime companion; *I wouldn't miss this fight for anything Essex*

*You do this for me and I know it!* Essex answered quickly, *Thank you!* They took off and joined the other riders above.

Alakar clued-in his dragons and riders as to the news from Lee Chin. *It appears that the battle will be fought here, and not where we had planned.* Chuckling he added; *they say if you want to hear the Father laugh; tell him your plans.*

Lady Mai and her staff were hastily returned to the hidden city. Everything was shut down and all was prepared for the coming battle.

Adam flew to Lady Emily's house looking for Celeste. As he landed he found her on the back decking, sitting there with the large gray wolf, Thor at her feet.

"Come," she called to him happily, "sit with me Adam. This is the time of waiting."

"Celeste we have to go," Adam rushed up to her, "Honey, the bad dragons are coming. I have to take you to safety."

"Silly Adam, we're perfectly safe here," she told him smiling sweetly. "Turn around Adam, look and see. Go ahead, turn around; look deeply Adam and truly see."

Adam turned around and looked out on the jungle plateau that Emily had so lovingly created. Every branch of every tree was filled with birds of all kinds; Toucans, Parrots of all varieties, even the elusive Quetzal Bird of Paradise. Every bush was covered with butterflies; the Monarch, the Blue Morpho, and a host of others. As he stood there, small animals came out of the jungle and climb onto the large plateau, little rodent-like Nutria, Smear Zorro foxes, wild rabbits, etc. They found a spot and lay down together. Adam stared in wonder as two large jungle leopards came slinking out of the jungle and went to the deck area lying down beside it. Several of the small antelopes that inhabit the area came out of the jungle at a dead run. They found a spot beside the large jungle pigs, and settled themselves. Not one of them made a sound - as if they all knew what was about to happen.

He turned around and looked at Celeste. "Little one, what is happening here, what does all this mean?"

"This is a sanctuary Adam, all are welcome here. The dark ones will not harm this place; they cannot harm what they cannot see."

She rose, went down the steps, and began to go to each of the animals. She leaned down and gently stroked each giving a word of comfort. The large leopards, which could have easily torn her to shreds, simply purred and rolled onto their backs exposing their bellies for her to scratch. Adam was speechless as he watched.

Then a giant yellow python came slithering across the plateau and she stopped before it. Bending down, she stroked its head and indicated the spot on the decking by her chair. The Python made its way there and curled itself into a tight ball and hid its head.

"She is very frightened Adam." Celeste went to Adam and took his hand. "It's all right Adam, we are safe here. Come sit with me and watch." Adam sat down besides her, his mind racing; suddenly he thought that he should let Lady Arian know where he was, so Emily wouldn't be worried.

"She already knows Adam," Celeste said, "I told her and Lady Emily so they would not worry about you. Isn't the garden here a wonderful place?" She was smiling serenely, not worried at all about what was to take place in the skies above. "Lady Emily is gifted indeed."

"Little one, you never cease to amaze me." Adam ruffled his hair, shaking his head back and forth. "I believe you, Celeste; we will be safe here." Adam knew that something beyond his understanding was taking place here in this little garden sanctuary. He trusted that he was placed here with this wondrous child for a reason; perhaps to be a witness to what was about to happen. And then he heard a very familiar voice.

*Adam, you are to remain there with the child. It was Jake! Do not leave, no matter what you hear, or what you think you see. You are to remain with Celeste. Understood?*

*Yes Jake, I understand. You have my word, I will not leave her, Adam promised.*

Having been warned by Lady Arian that the black devils were coming, the Shaman called all the people together and informed them that the great battle was about to take place. He divided them into small groups, and suggested they make themselves comfortable. He told them all that prayer would be a good thing right now. The great dragons that defended them could use all the help they could get.

**A huge dark writhing mass crossed over the tip of Tierra del Fuego blotting out the sky above. Howls and screeching could be heard by any with ears to hear.**

**The jungle below trembled in fear.**

12

**Valotin and Ichor came out of the thermals and fanned out across the heights. Alakar was waiting for him. The White burst out of the thermals and joined them.**

*Seth and I have a job to do and must leave you now. The White had taken on an almost regal bearing; he was in his element now. We wish you all good luck.*

**Seth called out to James; “It was good to know you James; you are one hell of a leader.” Turning he sought out Hannah, seeing her, his eyes flashed. “I will remember, I will!” He promised her. He raised his Staff of Light high in the air; “We salute you all!”**

**In a burst of speed much like a flash bulb going off, they were gone.**

**A booming voice now filled every riders mind.**

*You have all trained well and have tasted battle. You know what is to take place here this day. I have every confidence in each and every one of you. I am humbled to have been given this task by our Creator and proud to have known you all. We fight for all humanity this day, do me proud!*

**Turning to Alakar he gave his orders.**

*We use the Zulu formation. Alakar, you and your forces take to the right flank. Ichor, you and your forces go to the left. We will draw them in and attack from all sides.*

**Another great condor flew to Valotin. They pass over Santa Cruz. They begin to cross the Andes, good luck Dragons of Light! He flew away quickly.**

As they hovered there waiting for the approaching horde each rider and dragon began to think of all that had happened to bring them to this place. They went thru their training again in their minds. They saluted each other in friendship; thanked each other for the honor of being rider and companion. They professed their love for their mates. As this continued, they slowly began to take on a glow. Each rider and dragon began to glow with a bright blue-white light. It spread among them and soon the whole sky was brightly illuminated.

*They don't call us the Dragons of Light for nothing!* Valotin shouted to his great force.

*Ssssseeeth....* A voice hissed. *I know you are heeere... Listen tooo meeee...*

*What the hell was that?* Seth looked about him quickly, *Whitey, did you just hear that?*

*What are you talking about Seth?* The White asked, studying Seth's face intently.

*Whitey, I just heard the weirdest thing ... it was a hissing voice, calling to me.* Seth's voice betrayed his fear. *Are you sure you didn't hear anything?*

*Exactly what did you hear?* He eyed Seth carefully as he related what he heard. *It is NaTas that calls to you. He will try to get you to abandon me; abandon all of us.*

*Fat chance of that happening!* *The filthy bastard is nuts,* Seth angrily said.

*Just remember this, whatever he tells you, however possible it may seem; it is a lie.* *He is the master of lies is he not?*

The White turned and banked around a mountain.

Valotin's forces watched the approaching horde. At least 400 black ragged dragons were making their way towards them. They were a menacing band to an untrained eye. But Valotin could see, as he was sure Ichor and Alakar could also, most of these were too young to have had any battle experience. And that made them all the more unpredictable and dangerous. There were about a hundred of the older battle trained monsters. These he and the other leaders would engage and take out as quickly as possible. He looked again, where was NaTas; he could not see him among the advancing horde.

Alakar called to his warriors. *Remember, let them come to us; hold your ground. Take out the young ones quickly, Ragnar and Lady Risa, do what you do so well. Delan and Lady Drucilla, dive below and come from under them in your famous fan dance. They will try to scatter, that is when I want you, Kaseem and Lady Kai, to greet them in your famous cheery manner.*

The horde swept over the last mountain ridge and saw the shining dragons out over the sea waiting for them.

**CROSSBOWS!** Valotin boomed to his troops.

The horde began to screech and roar at the sight of them. A large black writhing mass of death and destruction, hell bent on ending the last opposition to their plans.

Valotin roared out again, *AIM!*

Ninety crossbows were raised to their riders' shoulders and aimed at the eyes of the approaching forces.

The horde passed over the large plateau and swept down over the deserted town. Closer they came, howling and screeching; talons extended.

*Wait...*

*Wait...*

**Valotin, Alakar, and Ichor's voices roared loud and clear giving the order...**

***FIRE!***

**A continent away, high in the mountains of the Himalayas, the White burst out of the thermals and began to spiral down towards the frozen specters which spanned across the horizon.**

***Whitey, what the hell? What are we doing here? Seth angrily asked his friend; suddenly very uneasy.***

***We are looking for a very large and well-hidden cave; it will be situated over an underground thermal vent. There is something in it you must destroy if we are to end this once and for all.***

**The White spoke in even tones, cold and unemotional. Not like him at all, and it made Seth that much more uneasy.**

***What's going on Whitey? You're acting really weird; I don't like this one bit.***

**An idea was beginning to form in Seth's mind, and he didn't like it.**

***There it is!***

**The White exclaimed and then turned to his friend and hurriedly said; *Listen carefully to me Slayer; whatever happens now is up to you. You and only you can end this. Keep Hannah's face in your mind for she is real; you two can have a future together. The rest is all illusion, do you hear me... illusion!***

**They closed on the cave opening, and just as they were about to enter it there was a sudden violent bump from below. The White went spiraling into the sidewall of the cave and hit with such a thud that it knocked him out. Seth was thrown free and landed sprawled on the floor of the cave. He roused himself and stood up reaching for his Fire Staff, looking about him.**

**He ran to the White and bending over the unconscious dragon shouted, *Whitey, Whitey, are you all right?***

***Ssseeeth... leave himmm... come to meee...* A hideous voice called to him.**

Seth stopped in his tracks. An old feeling began to take hold of him and wander thru his consciousness. It was oddly familiar. Looking about, he could see deep into the cave. There was a warm glow at the end of a long tunnel. Slowly he headed that way uncertain as to what he would find, and yet dreading finding it.

The walls of the cave glowed and seemed to come alive as he approached the cavern beyond. Pictures seemed to come alive on its surface, taunting him. Halting downward steps brought him to the large cavern. Deep within the mountain was a lake of lava and fire. He looked below; interspaced among the lava flows were huge giant boulders. He could see a dragon chained on one of them. He entered the cave and started to make his way down the path. Downward he went closer and closer. Now he could see; on the other boulder there appeared to be a human.

*What do you want of me?* Seth angrily yelled, only now realizing who was calling to him, *why do you call to me NaTas?*

*Loook.... Seeee beloow...*

Seth looked below and his blood froze in his veins. *No, this is impossible!*

Chained to the boulder in the middle of the lava lake was Tegen, his dragon of old! At least it appeared to be Tegen.

*Seth! Help me my brother! He keeps me prisoner here.*

He lay on the huge boulder, chained to the spot; held tightly in place. His body was a mass of bleeding open wounds. His wings had been shredded. He appeared to be suffering greatly. *Please! Remember me my brother and save me from this agony!*

The touch to his mind felt exactly like that of Tegen.

*No... this cannot be!*

Tegen was dead; he knew it, for he had killed him himself.

This was a trick of some kind.

*...NaTas! This was just an illusion!*

Looking about the large cavern Seth called out; *you can't fool me that easily you filthy bastard!*

"Seth, it's not a trick," said a smooth silky voice, "help us please?"

*That voice!* He knew it so well.

"He's brought us back to torment us; save us my love," she pleaded.

Seth turned around and looked below. On the boulder next to Tegen was a woman – *no!* She was chained to the rock; held by her feet and arms, splayed out for all to see. Her lovely naked body was covered in scratches and dried blood. Her face showed her torment. *No!*

Seth shook his head, pushed back his hair, rubbed his eyes and looked again. *Rebecca!*

Staring at his former love, his entire past came flooding back. Memories long dormant burst into his mind. *Oh God...* (Seth went to his knees holding his head).



A vision of holding her in his arms, the feel of her skin, silky and smooth; and the smell of her; sweet and fragrant. The taste of his kissing her consumed his mind. He could still feel the passion rise in his loins. *Rebecca!*

The memory of how intense their lovemaking was swept him away to another time and another place. The feel of her skin on his, the heat of their passion, the joy of their love... it was real once again. Flashes of their life together held him spell bound for several minutes. She was his soul mate... she would have died for him. Seth shook his head violently. *No! She did die for him!*

“Seth! Help us please, you know it is me.” She pleaded with him thru great sobs; “you know I would rather be dead than go thru life like this. Come my love, release me.”

Her voice became seductive and soothing to his tortured soul, “this is no longer our fight. We can go away from all this madness; live out our lives together. Let all this go, my love.” She pleaded with him, “What have they ever done for you except hunt you down and kill you. Leave them to it; let them fight it out amongst themselves. I am tired of all this endless fighting. Seth, we can be together again.”

“Rebecca?” Seth called out in uncertainty; confused in a whirlwind of emotions.

He took a halting step forward and suddenly before his minds eye was the crystal clear image of Hannah. Red hair aglow in the sunset, smiling and telling him she would wait for him, eyes aglow with love. The mist in his mind cleared to reveal the truth to Seth. Hannah was real, and a life with her was possible. All this was an illusion from a past long dead.

*Isn't that what Whitey said? But, if it wasn't real, he thought to himself, then why the elaborate subterfuge?* His mind racing, Seth realized this was a carefully planned trap - and he was the prize.

The White came to and shook his head to clear his mind. He looked about him and realized that the fight was still on; in the past he had never been privy to what took place. He had never come to still in the cavern.

*This time it would be different, Seth would make the right choice,* he thought as he slowly made his way down the long path to the cavern of lava below.

He would have to be very careful not to let them know he was alive.

He peered over the edge below and watched what was taking place.

*Father! No human could face such a thing and not be scarred by it,* he thought to himself. *Lord, give him strength!*

The White watched, as Seth stood straight, turned around, and deliberately began to descend to the chasm below.

Seth moved towards the creature he was sure was waiting below. His mind was now clear again; he knew this was not Rebecca; she was long dead, as was his dragon. But he didn't want NaTas to know his mind had cleared - not yet. He would play along for a bit longer. He looked about the cavern carefully as he descended; he could not make out where NaTas was hiding.

As he got closer he found that the woman on the rock did indeed appear to be Rebecca. In his mind he knew it wasn't her, yet his heart was affected by her enticing appearance. Her hair, her skin, her form; NaTas got everything correct, right down to the small star-shaped birthmark on her upper thigh.

Liquid pools of lava circled the two large boulders. It was so hot that the pools glistened and shined like a highly waxed floor; reflecting the cavern above. Looking into the pools Seth saw slight motion above; it was then that he saw NaTas watching him. Seth held himself in check; his mind was racing now to formulate a plan. As he turned around and continued his way down he caught the reflection of the White, high above, inching his way down.

*What do you want of me, you disgusting piece of carrion!*

Seth spat out, deciding to engage NaTas in conversation, to draw him out into the open.

*This is all an illusion, none of it is real; do you take me for a fool?*

Seth raged waving his arm over the area below.

*Show yourself you filthy bastard; or is it that you are afraid?*

Seth spat the words out as he slammed the Fire Staff on the cavern floor, sending a loud echoing boom throughout the great open space.

*Afraid of this human!*

*I fear nothing, NaTas hissed with contempt, least of all you!*

He showed himself and began to claw his way down the cavern wall to the fire below.

Seth watched as he slowly slithered down to him. He was huge, almost the size of the White; he was a black foul-smelling mass of living evil. His rage played across his face as he hissed and called Seth all kinds of vile names, spitting acid saliva below as he raged and made his way down.

There was hatred in his eyes; and Seth thought he also saw something else; fear.

The woman screamed out in terror pleading for release, his dragon pleaded for help; Seth held his ground.

*I could easily kill you where you stand human!* NaTas hissed in defiance at Seth.

Seth threw his back and laughed contemptuously, *I don't think so snake!*

He lowered his head and a terrible hissing filled the cavern stopping NaTas in his tracks.

Seth was making the sound, just as NaTas had been doing.

As Seth raised his head the change began to take place.

His face became like chiseled marble, he stood taller than before; and as he slowly raised his eyes above, the great black monster halted.

Seth's eyes were glowing bright green.

*Not without risking your own death by my Fire Staff.*

NaTas was no fool. He could see the change in Seth and his bearing. He would have to chip off the bravado that he was sure was a bluff on Seth's part. NaTas' voice took on a slithery condescending tone as he tried another tactic.

*There is no need for thissss... Even as we speak your so-called friends battle my army. Your small force of 30 cannot win against my army of 400. NaTas boasted loudly, they will all die and there is nothing you can do to prevent it.*

Seth threw his head back and laughed, the action startled NaTas for a moment.

*You think wrong fool! Your forces battle over 150 seasoned fighters. TRAINED BY JAKE!*

NaTas screamed loudly hissing at Seth, roaring obscenities.

*You lie... you try to take me off balance with liesss... We don't have to fight Slayer, you don't have to die.* He came closer down the side of the cavern wall.

*I can offer you this; he spread his wing to indicate Rebecca and Tegon, real and in the flesh!*

His voice was dripping with venom as he continued.

*I can give you what you have lost. You can live out your lives together anywhere in the world you choose.*

Seth hoped the White would recognize what he was doing and not kill him along with the black.

*Think... about... it.... Seeethhh...!*

Closer and closer he came to Seth, unaware that the White was also doing the same.

NaTas sneered and now delivered his final blow to Seth.

*You can have that child that was in her belly when last you saw her.*

Seth's head jerked up quickly as he fought to maintain control of his emotions.

*At what cost you vile demon from hell!*

Fire in his eyes, Seth called NaTas every vile thing he could think of, trying to keep his attention on him, trying to give the White time to get closer.

*You are a liar!* Seth hissed at the hideous creature, *All you do is lie.*

Now not twenty feet from him, Seth raised the Fire Staff and held it before him. NaTas eyed the staff uneasily. He hissed and screamed loudly, shooting a flame above in frustration and anger; narrowly missing the White.

*Simply take the woman and the dragon and go!*

NaTas spat at him and acid fell beside his foot.

Seth realized that he was now too close for comfort.

Feigning acceptance, Seth leapt onto the boulder that held the woman.

*It's never that easy, what do you want in return, demon?*

The White knew Seth was baiting NaTas, giving him time to descend.

Believing that he now had Seth in his grip, NaTas let out a long low guttural sigh of relief.

*All I ask is that you drop the Fire Staff on your way out of the cave entrance. I give you my word, he hissed vilely, I swear - no one will stop youuuu...!*

“Oh Seth, I knew you wouldn't leave me here like this,” the woman urged him raising her body seductively, “come my love, release me.”

Seth looked at her with tears in his eyes; tears for what could have been so long, long ago.

*How do I know I can trust you?* Seth kept his voice filled with hatred and contempt.

*You've never kept your word to anyone about anything!*

Seth kept drawing him out, making him think that he was considering his offer.

*I will keep my word to you on thissss humaaan... no dragon will harm you in any way.*

He was now standing on the exact spot Seth had been a few minutes ago.

*Decide quickly before I change my mind. Do you accept my offer?* NaTas hissed loudly.

Seth glared at NaTas for some long moments.

The woman pleaded again and Seth nodded to her slowly.

Relief showed on her face, along with something else... triumph.

Holding the Fire Staff, Seth raised it as though he was going to release the woman from the chains that bound her. He swung it downward and in one swift blinding movement he spun around and fired at NaTas, just as the White did the same from above.

A blinding flash engulfed the cavern and above the explosion NaTas could be heard screaming.

*Nooo!*

In a swirling mass of black fire he tittered on the edge for several seconds and then fell into the lake of lava; writhing and screaming, shooting out flames in all directions. The apparitions of Rebecca and Tegen disappeared like mist fading away.

Seth turned to face the White and opened his mouth to say something. In his last dying foul act, NaTas lashed out and hooked Seth's leg with his talon. Seth screamed in pain as he fell dropping the Fire Staff over the edge, just out of reach. NaTas began dragging him towards the pit of lava, almost ripping his leg from his body. The White flew to his friend's side firing at the black monster writhing in the lava.

Seth was holding on to the boulder but loosing his grip; the White saw only one way to save his friend. He grabbed Seth full in his mouth and pulled him back from the grasp of the dying monster; and in doing so caused Seth's leg to be shredded from the thigh to his ankle. Death finally came to the foul beast and he released his hold on Seth.

*Aieeeee! Seth screamed in agony.*

Panting heavily he raised his head and smiled at the White.

*Took you long enough to get here!*

His face twisted in agony, Seth screamed, *oh God! Whitey, my leg!*

The White scanned Seth's leg quickly. It was torn to shreds from the thigh to his foot, or what was left of his foot. Blood was gushing out of the wound.

*Turn your head, I have to stop the flow of blood quickly, or you will bleed to death.*

Seth turned away from the White and gritted his teeth for he knew what was coming. Rising up, the White let lose a long flame and then lowered his head and let his saliva drip out onto Seth's thigh. He screamed out in pain as the heated acid seared his wound and stopped the bleeding.

Around them the lava began to boil up, great leaps of fire began to reach up the cavern walls.

*We have to get out of here; the White said and quickly asked, can you climb up onto me?*

*I can try buddy.*

Seth pulled and dragged himself up onto the White's wing.

Panting and out of breath he rested for a few seconds.

*This will not do... the White knew it was taking too long.*

Raising his wing, the White tilted himself to the side and Seth rolled up towards his neck. Screaming in agony, Seth grabbed hold of one of his ridges and pulled himself up to his harness.

*Give me a minute Whitey everything is spinning around.*

Panting heavily and sweating profusely, Seth took a long deep breath. Muscles screaming in agony; he pulled himself up and managed to get into the seat without fainting.

*Okay, I'm in place Whitey; let's get the hell out of here!*

Seth harnessed himself in the seat just as the White rose up.

Lava was now bubbling up in great giant geysers all about them. In a flash they were above the boiling mass and heading out of the cave. The White picked up the Fire Staff in one of his claws on his way out.

*Our friends engage the enemy as we speak. Seth, the White called to him.*

The cold air slapped them brutally as they emerged into the bright sky.

The White handed the Fire Staff to Seth asking, *Can you weld it?*

*I can still fight if that's what you want to know, Seth answered defiantly.*

*You do not have to join their fight. You did well my brother, very well, the White bugled praise, and you earned a rest from their battle.*

Seth shook his head defiantly. *No! They need us Whitey!*

Understanding, the White asked him once more, *are you sure you are able to fight?* Seth was deathly pale.

*After what just happened below, it'll be a breeze!* Seth jokingly answered him. More seriously he said, *they really do need us Whitey, I won't abandon them; no matter the cost!*

Knowing the price Seth could possibly pay, the White bugled 'approval' loudly and headed upwards towards the thermals. Their part in all this was now over; but both felt strongly that they must help their friends in the final battle. At the back of their minds was now the thought that they could both die. But then again, everything was changed now, and just perhaps they could look forward to living out complete lives. Cold air brought them both back from daydreaming about what could be. There were still four hundred dragons to destroy, and their friends were only a force of about one hundred fifty or so dragons. They had to help them.

Right now Seth was numb to everything; but the White knew that that would wear off soon. Seth would be plunged back into agonizing pain and possible death. Even knowing this, Seth insisted that they had to join their brothers in the fight. The White was very proud of the actions Seth had chosen this time. He listened as Seth began to relate to the White what had occurred; he was rambling, delirious from loss of blood.

*It was so real Whitey; I could actually smell her scent. So much came back to me, I remembered it all. Our lives together, and all the wonderful times we had with each other, everything!*

Tears began to cascade down Seth's face; his emotions were raw.

*And Tegen, it sounded just like him, but worse - it felt like him. I was sorely tempted, ready to put all this behind me and just run away with her and Tegen. But then I remembered what you said Whitey, and all of a sudden there was Hannah's face before me. It was crystal clear, true reality! It broke whatever hold NaTas had on my mind. And I knew then that it was all an elaborate illusion.*

*I am proud of what you did Seth. I knew you had it in you; you just needed a little convincing. The White began to feel Seth's pain. We must get you to a doctor, I can feel the pain you bear; you have been injured badly*

*No Whitey! They need our help back at Dragon's Bay; I'll be all right. I just need a rush of adrenalin to clear away the cobwebs.*

Seth knew that Hannah was still in danger; the black would have made plans that included her death. He told the White what he was thinking and he agreed with him.

*I still have enough reserves to keep me going for about an hour. After that, all bets are off; so we had better hurry.*

They rushed along the thermals towards Dragon's Bay.

Seth lost consciousness minutes later. In a dream-like state he found himself floating over a large mesa. As he landed Jake came to him and tended his wounds. He told him he could numb the pain for a time; but the cost might be his life. Seth considered this and told him to do it, he could not abandon his fellow riders; the risk was worth it to him.

The White turned to check on Seth once more and noticed his color coming back. Seth roused himself and seemed more alert.

*Hold on my friend, we are coming out of the thermals above Dragons Bay.*

13

As the screeching, roaring mass of Black Death came out over the Bay, ninety barbed arrows went flying into the mass and halted them momentarily. Eyes were blinded in many; others tried to pull out the arrows and succeeded only in pulling out their eye or hulking bits of surrounding tissue. Valotin's force attacked and forty devils fell in the first pass.

Alakar and Ichor's forces swept in on both sides. Delan and Lady Drucilla dived below them and came up in the middle of them flaming in a spinning circle of fire. Sean and Terry could be heard yelling loudly. Twelve dragons fell severely injured or dying. They dove below again and flamed them all to dust before they hit the waiting sea below.

Four of the larger and more seasoned black devils sought out Hannah and Lady Vesta. They had specific instructions from NaTas to kill them both. Spotting her fighting among the younger ones, they dove below and came up under her. In the last second Ichor saw what was about to happen and sent a warning as he dove on them flaming. Lady Vesta pulled up quickly and did a spiral flip and came down on them flaming also. Two of them got away and doubled back, coming at Hannah from her blind side. Just as the devils were about flame her, a bright blue-white flame came from out of the heights and turned them to dust. The White and Seth raced by her and took out four more.

Valotin's eyes were wide in surprise as the White streaked by him - with Seth on his back. *NaTas is dead, Valotin!* The White shouted out loudly; *Seth chose wisely!*

Valotin was astonished at this turn of events. He quickly sent word to the other leaders and First Wings. Emboldened by this news, they doubled their attacks. The Dragons of Light managed to separate the black mass into three large groups. Then they engaged them in battle. Fighting in pairs just as they had been taught, they began to take them out quickly. Flames were searing in all

directions. James took a hit to his left shoulder and Valotin flamed the arrogant dragon to dust even as he was gloating over it.

Cedric took a flame to his leg and Trinidad bellowed loudly. Elliott and Lazar destroyed the braggart who did it within minutes. It fell to the sea and Cedric thanked his longtime friend for his help.

A large black came from above and seared Ichor across his head, momentarily blinding him. Sarah let loose with a barrage from her crossbow. She directed Ichor to flame to the left and then to the right; hoping to buy time till his sight returned. Two more came from behind her and the White streaked by and turned the black fools to dust as they were preparing to flame Sarah. Lady Isobol fought her way to Ichor's side and kept most of the rest at bay. Ichor's sight returned quickly and he went after the black devils with a vengeance.

The hours of training the riders and dragons had endured now paid off. The inept black dragons were falling under the thunderous flames of the Dragons of Light.

Emily and Lady Arian were fighting beside Lady Valeria when two of the smaller black dragons came at her from behind. Suddenly the beast's heads were engulfed by a flock of Harpy Eagles. Tearing with their mighty talons they ripped both their eyes out. Then they concentrated on the smaller of the two and actually brought him down as his cohort was flamed to dust by Lady Arian. She and Lady Emily sent them a hearty 'thank-you' and urged them to go to safety. Emboldened by their success they asked to join the fight. Valotin insisted they go to safety as flames were shooting out all over the sky.

The three leaders banded together and began to flame in unison. They cleared a pathway through the thick of them and then fanned out and began to engage the larger ones in mortal combat.

Valotin flew into a group of them talons extended and tore two of them apart.

Fear began to grip the tired and outmatched black monsters, they began to realize that they were being out maneuvered at each turn. They feared for their very lives and in a panic began to flame crazily trying to find an opening, a way to flee this horror.

Great howls and shrieking could be heard all the way to the underground city. The people below screamed in fear and the Shaman brought them together and they began to pray for the Dragons of Light.

Ragnor and Lady Risa took on seven of the smaller ones going thru them like a runaway flamethrower on a rampage. Reggie and Cynthia could be heard yelling and shouting along with the dying dragons. They began falling like raindrops to the sea. Diving quickly below Lady Risa flamed them to dust before they hit the water.

Many began to try to flee the area only to be met by Essex and Lady Elise. Not sure of his ability, Essex waited for a small opportunity like this to see if Vail could flame him. He needn't have worried; his flame was as sure as it had always been. He and Lady Elise joined the main fray and were soon dropping dragons as quickly as the others.

Several of the more seasoned blacks managed to get in some lucky hits on the riders. But none of them were serious. The riders' dragons were incensed by this action and quickly flamed the upstarts to dust. The battle was now on in earnest. Knowing that they were doomed, the remaining black dragons tried to band together and flee the area. Each time they tried to break out of the fray they were met by several more dragons, all flaming at them. They were being herded into a tight group. Panic seized them and they began to flame in all directions, desperately trying to get away from the Dragons of Light. That is when the unthinkable happened.

Four of the black devils broke free and came at Alakar and Lady Anya in a frenzied panic. With flames flying in all directions they literally ran over them. Crazy and panic stricken, they were more dangerous than ever. Talons extended, screeching and trying to scramble away from the flames in any direction, one managed to literally 'trip' over, and sink his claws into Alakar's neck. A great howling roar went out across the entire sky.

Everyone heard Peter's anguished cry: *VALOTIN!*

Valotin and Ichor turned and the sight chilled them to the bone. Alakar was in the grip of two panicked dragons; blood was gushing all over the large dragon. The two had their talons wrapped in Valotin's neck, and Peter's chest. The two young inexperienced monsters were succeeding where others had failed; they were pulling down an Ancient!

Valotin and Ichor roared their anger and the mountains shook. Valotin and Ichor broke free and flew to their brother's aid in a blinding flash; trying desperately to stop what was taking place. Great giant flames were sent out in all directions to keep the other dragons at bay.

Realizing that they might have a chance several of the larger black devils tried to bar Valotin's way; he turned them to dust quickly and continued to fight his way to Alakar. Several more attacked him and Ichor came to his aid. As Valotin and Ichor finally reached them they froze at what they saw before them.

The blacks and Alakar were locked in a deadly embrace.  
Alakar was gushing blood badly from a neck wound.  
Peter was covered in blood and had drawn his sword.  
As they watched, Peter suddenly jerked forward with a talon thru his chest.  
He was ripped off of Alakar, and thrown to the sea below.  
A loud shriek erupted from Alakar and was just as quickly cut off.  
The inexperienced young blacks were in a frenzied panic roaring and howling.  
Lady Cicely slumped forward, blood pouring from her mouth, she too slipped to the sea below.  
Lady Anya roared the Death Knell loudly.  
Then she and Alakar followed Peter and Lady Cicely to the sea below.

*No... No!*

Ichor and Valotin both yelled as they descended on the four monsters and ripped them to shreds, even as they were flaming the fallen Ancient.  
Sarah and James were stunned by what had just taken place.

Ragnar flew to the sea below howling bitterly; *My Liege!*  
Reggie was scanning the waters looking for his friends, tears running down his face. "Peter!"  
As Alakar's First Wing, Ragnar was in command now and he knew it.  
*Delan! Lady Drucilla! Break away and search the sea. Alakar has fallen!*

Delan and Lady Drucilla broke away from the battle and flew to Ragnar. Reggie and Lady Cynthia were crying; their dragons were calling out to their fallen leader.  
*Search the sea; see if they can be found!* Ragnar commanded them.  
Sean and Terry began to scan the water below.

At the sight of an Ancient falling, the remaining black dragons were emboldened to renew their attacks. They didn't know the Dragons of Light very well; Alakar's fall only set these dragons resolve



to end this once and for all. They attacked with everything they had; black dragons began to fall like leaves from a tree. None were given any quarter. In twenty minutes the remaining dragons were turned to dust and the world was free at last of the menace they caused.

As the news spread among dragons and riders of Alakar's fall, a loud keening began. Four of their own had fallen... honor was due them.

Delan called to Ragnor, he had found them.

Ragnor and Lady Risa flew to the area. A call went out immediately for Kaseem and Essex.

Reggie dove into the water along with Terry and Sean.

They retrieved the bodies of Peter and Lady Cicely.

Reggie handed Peter to Vail; Lady Cicely was handed to Theo.

*Take them to the plateau and wait for us, Valotin ordered.*

Valotin and Ichor went into the sea and swam to Alakar. Coming up on each side they positioned themselves under his wings and gently rose into the air. As they did so they saw that his neck had been ripped open by the fiends. Ragnor and Delan did the same for Lady Annya. Each had been terribly burned and taken several hard hits.

*All dragons are to remain in the air, Valotin ordered.*

He and Ichor landed carefully on the plateau. Ragnor and Delan landed just behind them. James and Lady Sarah were openly weeping.

*Bring Peter to Alakar, Valotin's voice boomed loudly.*

James leapt down and went to his friend one last time, tears in his eyes. He adjusted his riding jacket, remembering how fussy Peter was about his appearance. He removed his riding helmet. He and Reggie and Sean and Theo carried Peter to Alakar and placed him on his companion's back.

*Bring Lady Cicely to Lady Annya, Valotin ordered.*

Elizabeth, Susanna, and Cynthia carried Lady Cicely to her dragon. Crying openly the women prepared her, their grief so profound that all felt it. They adjusted her clothing, wiped her face and patted her hair in place. Then they placed her on her dragons' back for one last ride.

*Form two lines from the plateau to the heights, ordered Valotin. The dragons and riders took to the skies and fanned out as requested by Valotin.*

Carefully Valotin and Ichor lifted their friend up and gently flew to the heights. Ragnor and Delan were right behind them with Lady Annya. At the very top, just before the thermals began, they hovered.

*Both Alakar and Peter gave their lives so that we could live free from the black menace. They knew the risks of the last battle, and they eagerly accepted those risks.*

*Alakar was a great and true friend and I shall miss him dearly. His mate Lady Annya was a true and loyal dragon of light. She gave herself to try to save her mate. No greater deed can any dragon do.*

All the dragons roared approval.

*Peter was a tireless and dedicated leader, always looking out for his riders and rescuing them in times of need. He was always trying to improve himself, and thus help Alakar. He accepted the mantle of leader*

*and deferred to his dragon's wisdom in all things. He was a true friend to most of us here and shall be sorely missed.*

*Lady Cicely was a true and loving mate, a truly good woman. She helped Peter in all things and gave him wise council. She always looked to the care and comfort of her fighting wing. She gladly gave her life to try to save Peter's. No one could ask for more in so loving a mate.*

**Together, Valotin and Ichor raised their voices:**

*We commend their spirits to the Creator who made us all. May they fly in peace and harmony with Him, now and forever!*

**On Valotin's command they released the two dragons and flew at lightening speed below. As Alakar and Lady Annya slowly spiraled below, Valotin and Ichor flamed their bodies to the great beyond. The dragons all roared loudly and the valley below thundered.**

*Everyone return to the plateau, check yourselves and your dragons for any burns. Valotin ordered with a heavy heart.*

**It was a sad group that returned to the plateau below. They had won, yes, but the price had been a high one to pay. Valotin landed and James dismounted.**

*How is your shoulder James? You took a hit for me up there, asked Valotin.*

*I'll have the doctor look at it. Valotin my friend, I am so sorry for your loss, James told his companion. I know how close you were to Alakar; I shall miss Peter a great deal.*

**The White landed and called to Valotin, *Valotin, I require your aid, Seth is badly injured.***

**Seth slipped off his seat and slid onto the White's wing, unconscious. James ran to the White with Jackson right behind him.**

**The White related their tale to Valotin. *He killed NaTas, but he paid for it with his leg I fear. The bleeding has started again. Even though he was mortally injured he insisted that we join the fight. He would not hear of a doctor seeing to his injury.***

**They carried a deathly pale Seth off the plateau and down to the clinic. Vail asked Valotin to send for the Shaman telling him that if he could get Vail back the use of his leg, maybe he could help Seth.**

**Sarah came into the clinic behind them, "he saved my life up there for sure. I was about to be flamed by two of the monsters and he came out of nowhere."**

**"Me too, he saved my life too," continued to echo throughout the clinic. Many of the riders now related how the White and Seth had saved them from the flames of the black devils.**

**Having been informed by her dragon, Hannah rushed to the clinic and pushed her way in.**

**"Oh no," she yelled at the sight of Seth, "not after all this... he was supposed to be free now!"**

Nigel came into the clinic. “All right, out, out, get out, all of you. Let me see what I can do for him.”

Hannah refused to leave but the other riders forcibly took her out. She remained on the porch, waiting.

Nigel began to examine Seth’s leg. “My God! I can’t believe he’s still alive with an injury like this.” He quickly called to Valotin.

*Valotin, it is not possible to save his leg. There is no leg to save, just shredded nerves, muscle, and flesh. There is not much left of his foot either. I don’t know how he managed to fly at all. To be perfectly honest with you, Valotin, I don’t know why he is still alive.*

*I have sent for the Shaman, wait till he arrives. Valotin answered him adding, and Nigel, try to have an open mind.*

At Emily’s house, the animals began to leave just as they had arrived. The birds took to the air in exultation, shouting out to the world that they were all free. Adam watched as the leopards went off into the jungle along with the great python.

Celeste took his hand and told him that she was needed at the clinic quickly. Adam picked her up in his arms and took off, heading towards the clinic. He noticed the dragons on the large plateau and sought out Lady Arian.

*I am here Adam, she told him happily, and Lady Emily is fine, not a scratch on her.*

The Shaman arrived and quickly went in to examine Seth. He checked the leg thoroughly and looked at Nigel shaking his head. *Valotin, Great One, are you there?*

*Yes my friend, I am listening, Valotin answered quickly, what say you, can his leg be saved?*

*There is nothing to save. His foot is shredded and the muscle and nerves have been ripped from the leg. I am surprised he is still alive. His lips are blue and so are his fingernails. Death is coming for him Great One, I am sorry. The Shaman covered Seth and left the room.*

Hannah was at the door to the clinic, “Nigel, please let me go to him.”

“Hannah,” Nigel saw the worried look on her face, “he is unconscious, he won’t even know that you are there.”

**“I don’t care.” She was determined, “if he’s going to die, he shouldn’t be alone. No one should die alone. I want to be there with him right up to the end. Please Nigel!”**

**Nigel looked at the Shaman; “I can do nothing for him. The Creator of us all will decide his fate.”**

**Nigel looked at Hannah, “all right, go ahead, in there,” he said pointing.**

**A short time later Adam and Celeste landed outside the clinic amid the riders. Adam saw Emily and released Celeste who went running towards the clinic. Emily spotted Adam and ran to him; they embraced.**

**“I’m fine Adam, really.” Then she told him of the battle and the loss of Alakar and Lady Annya, Peter and Lady Cicely.**

**“And who is in the clinic?” Adam asked looking at all the riders gathering outside the clinic.**

**“It’s Seth, Adam, he’s dying.” Emily told him, tears in her eyes.**

**Adam paled as his eyes went wide. He shook his head in denial, “No, he was going to win this time!”**

**Adam had not been touched by loss thru death yet; not of a close friend. He knew Peter and Alakar, liked them, and he mourned their passing. But he did not know them as closely as he knew James, or Valotin, or Seth. “No Em, not Seth!”**

**He turned and headed back towards the clinic just as Celeste was climbing up the stairs. Suddenly Adam paused staring at the small child. She turned to him and winked. Adam grinned and turned to Lady Emily saying, “everything is going to be okay, Em.”**

**Nigel stopped Celeste as she tried to enter the clinic, “No, no little one; this is no place for you.”**

**Adam quickly came up behind her, “Nigel, believe me, you want her to go in there. Trust me!”**

**Celeste looked up at Adam and pointed to the people gathering outside. “You know they can’t be here Adam,” she whispered.**

**“Go ahead honey; I’ll get rid of everyone out here,” he smiled shoing her inside and closing the door. As Celeste went into the clinic, Adam turned and asked everyone to leave.**

**“Look, I can’t explain it, but you all have to leave this area. Believe me it has to be this way. Go to the Café, I’ll come and get you when it is over. Don’t ask, I couldn’t begin to explain it if I wanted to.”**

**Inside the clinic Celeste walked around the corner and down the hallway into the room where Seth had been placed. Hannah was by his side holding his hand; tears streaming silently down her face.**

**“If you can hear me Seth, know that I am here and I care deeply.” Head bent she whispered close to his ear, “I will not leave you alone.”**

**Celeste came up to her and touched her shoulder.**

**“Don’t cry Lady Hannah; Seth gave of himself and saw the truth at last.”**

**She began to speak of many things to Hannah, telling her what Seth had done in the large cavern. What he had seen and how hard it had been for him to make his decision. How the vision of Hannah and the hope of a life with her had made him see the truth at last and break the hold of the evil one. When she was finished she sweetly told Hannah to go and wait with Adam; “I cannot continue if you are here.”**

**Hesitantly Hannah got up and made her way down the hall. She went over all the young girl had just told her, trying to sort it out. A thought began to form in her mind as she turned and looked at the young girl with hope. Adam came in and put his arm around her and led her out to the porch. They both sat down on the front steps and waited.**

**Adam spoke in a soft even voice, “Hannah, whatever you see here, or hear, you can never speak of it to anyone. I can’t explain why, but no one must ever know what takes place here. Do you understand?”**

**Adam’s eyes were shining brightly and his smile was radiant. Hannah knew enough that she guessed something was going to happen on the mystical scale. So she nodded assent.**

**Celeste went to the bed and pulled off the covering. She looked at Seth’s leg and took a deep breath. She began to call to him in a singsong fashion.**

*Seth? Seth, come back.*

**She waited for a few minutes.**

*No, no... you cannot go to that place; it is not your time yet.*

**She cocked her head as if listening.**

*Yes, come back, Hannah is here waiting for you, she needs you.*

**Celeste suddenly smiled.**

*Yes, that’s right, come back, Hannah needs you.*

**Celeste climbed up on the bed and settled herself beside Seth’s leg. She closed her eyes and concentrated; deeper and deeper she went into a trance-like state. She placed her little hands on the shredded mass that had once been Seth’s leg and began to rock back and forth, and hum.**

**Outside on the porch, they heard her.**

**And as if joining in, the dragons on the plateau began to keen loudly.**

**The sound was deep and resonated everywhere, increasing in volume.**

**It became a deafening chorus and those below in the café came outside and looked up towards the plateau.**

**The dragons lined up on the edge of the plateau overlooking the clinic and continued the keen. Suddenly there was a bright flash of blue-white light.**

The entire clinic was engulfed in it; bright light was streaming out of all the windows.

Adam pulled Hannah to him, ducked his head down, and wrapped his wings about them both, shielding their eyes.

The dragons all turned their heads upward and shot out flames towards the heavens.

An hour passed before the humans were aware again.

“Good Lord Adam,” Hannah asked breathlessly, looking up at him, “what just happened?”

“Something for Seth, Hannah,” he answered smiling as he opened his wings, “something special for Seth.”

After a few minutes Hannah began to tell Adam of her feelings for Seth. Their brief encounters, and the strong inner feeling that there was more to it. He was so familiar she told him; she couldn't shake the feeling that they belonged together.

“I know there was good in him Adam; even though he tried to scare everyone away, I could see beyond that. I felt something there, and I know he felt it too. I had hoped that there was something for us, a future together. And now... if he dies...”

“I'm not dead yet woman,” she heard a familiar voice sardonically say, “don't bury me before my time.”

Adam and Hannah leaped to their feet and turned around.

Seth stood in the doorway, with Celeste by his side holding his hand.

She giggled and looked up at Seth, and then waved at Hannah to come forward.

Hannah bounded up the porch steps and stood there staring at Seth, questioning with her eyes.

“Seth?” She asked hesitantly as she looked him over; his leg was fine - perfectly fine.

“Your leg!”

Seth reached out and slid his arm around her waist and pulled her to him holding her tightly against his chest.

He bent and hissed her head as tears streamed down his face.

She slid her arms around him and they held on to each other for long minutes.

Then he kissed her with all the passion he had kept locked up inside him.

When they parted she was grinning up at him.

She hugged him again, “They said you were dying... they said...”

“The bastards were wrong,” he laughed scornfully, “not the first time, either.”

Celeste looked up at him and waved her finger, “yes, yes I know little one; my apologies.”

Seth looked down into Hannah's eyes, really seeing her now for the first time, and said in a soft tone, “I love you woman, I have for centuries. I just didn't recognize you here and now.”

He kissed her gently and then continued.

“Your love saved me Hannah, in more ways than you will ever know. We have our whole lives to live... finally together.”

He smiled and pulled her to him and kissed her again. When they parted he bent down and picked up Celeste.

“Thank you little one,” he said swinging her around. “You have some pretty big friends up there,” Seth whispered in her ear.

Celeste just giggled and put her little finger to her mouth and said, “Shhh...!”

## 14

Two months later found the little village almost back to normal. Seth’s miraculous healing was never fully explained; and he claimed no memory of anything after the battle. Only he and Celeste knew what really happened.

Seth’s broken and twisted spirit was also healed during this time, and he and Hannah’s love grew strong. When Seth moved his belongings into Hannah’s hut, many were surprised. Ichor and Valotin seemed to be the only ones who weren’t surprised.

To the further surprise of all but one - the White took Lady Vesta as his mate and his color began to take on a greenish hue.

Ragnar and Reggie accepted the leadership of Alakar’s clan. Jake confirmed that he would come to Dragon’s Bay to officiate at the transformation of Ragnar to the status of Ancient. He would become Ragnar, Fifth of the Ancients, the Restorer. He would assume Alakar’s task of returning to the British Isles and restoring those lands to peace once again.

Terry convinced Lady Mai to come with him when they left; he simply told her he wouldn’t leave without her. At the behest of Terry, and small urgings from Lady Drucilla and Delan, Valotin agreed to a small enhancement for the ancient lady. She was returned to her fifties so she would survive the trip to England. There she would happily live out her life with her two ‘sons’.

Master Jeffery returned to Dragon's Bay with Steve as his escort. He brought along many books that he hoped to fill with details of the battles the great dragons had fought. He quickly set about picking the brains of every rider and dragon. In the end he did indeed fill his books.

Celeste never seemed to be available for one of his interviews; and Master Jeffery finally 'saw the light' and let it go. (Some things man was not meant to know just yet.) At the urging of Ichor he met the native Shaman and the two became instant friends. As preservers of the history of their people, they were kindred spirits. They spent many hours together discussing the new history of mankind. By the time Jeffery was finished he knew the Dragon Chronicles would encompass two large books.

During this time, Steve was able to renew his friendship with Adam. Through him he was introduced to the mysterious, 'Seth'. Steve's easy way took hold and the three of them became good friends. Like the 'Three Musketeers' all three got along quite well, and into trouble without much effort. Nights were spent in raucous laughter as each tried to out do the other.

Steve and his tales were hard to beat, but Adam had him rolling in laughter when he relayed the tale of Diana's visit and the stir she caused among the entire camp. He and Lady Emily acted out the entire scene, with great dramatic license. Lady Emily had captured Diana and her childlike way quite well. Everyone was roaring with laughter as she and Adam portrayed the confrontation between Diana and Big John; Lady Emily cooing and rubbing herself against Adam. 'But John of my heart...' she cooed as she batted her eyes at Adam.

Steve laughed so hard he fell out of his chair. But the biggest laugh was yet to come as they recreated how Wolf, and Big John, and all the dragons, and the dogs, were howling when Diana sat and began to cry. Steve was in hysterics laughing so hard that his sides hurt; and Master Jeffery was quickly adding that bit of news to his chronicles.

Best of all, Adam finally got to meet Jake. When he found out that he was coming he begged Valotin to allow him to greet him in the air. Knowing that Adam credited Jake for his deliverance, he agreed.

A week later Jake came out of the thermals with his Queen and they began to spiral downward to slow their speed. Kate was thrilled and called to Daniel.

*Look below Daniel; see how green the jungle canopy is, oh it's absolutely beautiful!*

A flock of Harpy Eagles flew up and paid homage to Jake in great dives and spirals. Adam was right behind them.

*Kate, look below, said Daniel excitedly, is that the birdman, Adam, flying up to greet us? Kate noted Daniel's excitement at the sight of the amazing flying man they heard so much about.*

*Jake confirmed everything with a booming chuckle.*

Adam flew up to them and hovered before Jake. His face betrayed his excitement as he was grinning broadly.

*Hail Jake, First of the Ancients! It's me Jake, Adam, whom you saved. I wanted to be the first to greet you. To thank you for opening up the whole beautiful world to me! Welcome to Dragons Bay!*

*Adam, I am pleased and honored to meet you at last. We have all heard of your many accomplishments. Jake flew closer to Adam and the two hovered there for some small moments starring at each other.*

*Your words honor me, but it is you Adam, who made the changes in your life.*

*Jake bugled 'approval' loudly and it was heard across the valley.*



*Now may I introduce you to my Rider and Companion, Lady Kate.*  
Adam flew to Jake's side and bowed in mid-air to Kate, who giggled like a schoolgirl.  
Jake continued, *My Queen and her Rider and Companion, Daniel.*  
Adam flew to Queenie and bowed and then to Daniel and bid him welcome.

*Let us go below and greet your many friends Adam.*

They flew to the plateau where Valotin, Ichor and Ragnar were waiting. Jake landed with his Queen beside him. All bowed to Jake and welcomed him.

Kate and Daniel dismounted and James and Elizabeth came forward to greet them. The riders descended to the town café where everyone was waiting for them. The natives had decorated the café with many beautiful flowers and hanging orchids. As they entered, the entire town greeted them warmly.

High above the mighty dragons conferred on the plateau. Jake was filled in on the final battle and the extraordinary effort put forth by Seth. He congratulated each and every dragon on a job well done. He praised them for their solid strength and devotion to their Riders.

*Valotin, I congratulate you on a mighty victory. It was a most difficult task, and the price was a high one to pay; but the world is now free forever of the burning menace.*

Turning his large body, Jake faced Ichor.

*Ichor, I salute you also in adhering to the plan and in keeping Seth preoccupied with Hannah. You have accomplished what none were able to in the past. I bow to your wisdom.*

Jake lowered his head in respect to Ichor. Ichor countered with a nod of his own.

Turning to Valotin, Jake asked, *and what of Seth and the White?*

*Look below to the Bay Jake, Valotin indicated with his large head. Do you see two dragons in the water swimming? It is the White and Lady Vesta... surprising is it not?*

Jake chuckled loudly, *yes my friend, very surprising indeed. And Seth, he did recover?*

*Hell Jake, said a booming voice, it takes a lot more than that to kill me!*

Seth stood there on the plateau to the right of Ichor's wing; in his hand was the Staff of Fire.

Jake turned his massive head as Seth came forward and bowed low before him.

Jake lowered his head and their eyes met.  
In those eyes Jake no longer saw hate - it had been replaced with love.  
*You have done well Seth, he said softly and with obvious pride.*

Seth went to his knees and raised the Staff of Fire over his head.  
*As I promised you long, long ago, I now return the Staff of Fire...*  
He held it out to Jake in both his hands, and softly said the final words.  
*The beast is dead; I have completed my task.*

Jake took the staff in his mouth and with one quick movement threw it high above and flamed it to dust. Then he lowered his head and said the words he had been waiting to say for so long.  
*Go and live your life in peace Seth; you are free of your obligation.*

Seth came forward and hugged Jake briefly. He let go and backed up, bowed, and turning he saw Hannah waiting for him. Smiling he went to her and they embraced.  
“I’m free Hannah, free at last!” They left the plateau holding hands.

Turning to Ichor Jake asked, *Ichor, what say you to returning to Austria and governing that part of the world? They have need of a strong leader in that part of Europe. I understand that many of your riders of from that part of the country.*

*I would be honored my liege, Ichor replied quickly. Sarah has had many dreams of the area and believes that we would settle there one day. I shall enjoy telling her how right she was.*

Valotin and Ichor left the plateau and Jake waited there for a bit.  
*They are all gone little one. You may come out now.*

Celeste skipped out onto the plateau towards Jake. She came right up to his lowered head and hugged him tightly.  
*You make a very good dragon Jake! I have missed you!*

*Yes my sweet, and I you. Raising his head to the sky, Jake said; I rather like being a dragon. Will you be coming back with me to Dragons Hill?*

*Yes I will. There is much to do there to heal the people. But when Lady Valeria has her next clutch I must return. She giggled and continued; Lady Cicely will be waiting for me to contact her.*

*Ah yes! You must have your dragon my sweet. Valotin and Lady Valeria will be much honored when they find out about you! Jake chuckled loudly. Now go below before you are missed.*

Celeste kissed Jake’s lowered nose and he watched as she skipped off the plateau.  
*What wonders she will perform! He said to no one.*

**Later that evening Jake and Valotin looked out over the plateau. Loud music was coming from the café as the riders were all enjoying themselves.**

*They have all earned this time of rejoicing. I am very proud of all of them. They have become a new breed of human; strong in the knowledge of right and wrong.*

**Valotin mused; *I wonder what the future holds for us all? Do you know where all this will lead?***

**Jake chuckled and looked at his friend, *oh, things are coming along quite nicely, I think.***