

Dragonheroes Of Atlantia
Book One: Arrival



Dan Sharpe

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Preface:

This is my first novel, I have made several passes through the manuscript searching for elusive typos, pesky misspellings, and annoying grammatical errors. It is my hope that I have managed to vanquish most, if not all of them, along with any dastardly logical errors. I apologize ahead of time for any that remain.

This book is the first of an as yet undetermined multi-book series. As the first book, it focuses on the arrival of our protagonists, their settling in, making new friends, and meeting old enemies. I had originally intended that this book would be two to three times as long as it has ended up being. But as I progressed it became clear to me that ending this initial installment where I have, would allow me to target each of the remaining books more accurately. As a result, the teasers in the prolog refer to a far distant day, I beg your indulgence, and patience, until I am able to fulfill that promise of an eventual, ultimate battle between the darkness, and the light in the final book of the series.

This series has several themes/aspects: self discovery, vanquishing self-doubt, overcoming self-rejection, faith, faithfulness, honor, courage, and love. If the concepts of Christianity, Transgenderism, violence as an instrument of justice, or 'magic' based on will and God given authority offend, you may want to pass on the series.

Parents considering this book for children should be aware that there are approximately 5 instances of vulgarity in this book, they are, I think, an authentic expression of the characters who utter them. There is also one, non explicit reference to sex.

Many of the characters in this book are members of Mensa, I myself am not, though throughout my life many of my friends and acquaintances have been, or are, Mensa members. I also make reference to several authors and their works, all of which I heartily recommend. I shall endeavor to list such references in my Afterward. I apologize ahead of time for any that I might miss. The characters of Frank, Heidi, Abby, and Ellie are based loosely upon friends of mine who have consented to their first names being used. The real Heidi, Frank, Abby and Ellie, are far cooler than these characters represent.

Dramatis Personae

To aid your imagination, I provide here, a brief description of the major characters:

Serelynn Song – 27, blonde hair, sky blue eyes, 5' 4", Caucasian.

Raevyn Song – 27, pink, purple, blue, or green hair, green eyes, 5' 6", Goth.

Galen Song – 17, sandy brown hair, brown eyes, 5' 7", Caucasian.

Valen Song – 17, sandy brown hair, brown eyes, 5' 7", Caucasian.

Danny Chin – 34, short black hair, dark brown eyes, 5' 5", Asian.

Paul Stephens – 32, medium black hair, hazel eyes, 5' 8", Caucasian.

Sebastian Song – 53, gray hair, steel gray eyes, 6' 0", Caucasian.

Naomi Song – 47, black hair, blue eyes, 5' 5", Caucasian.

Ken Northman – 37, dark brown hair, dark brown eyes, 5' 4", African American.

Samson "Gunny" Brown – 26, red hair, Grey eyes, 6' 3", Caucasian.

Marcus Caine – 18, black hair, brown eyes, 5' 7", African American.

Amanda Caine – 17, brown hair, green eyes, 5' 1", African American.

Steve Starke – 17, black hair, blue eyes, 5' 8", Caucasian.

Mike Jella – 17, light brown hair, brown eyes, 5' 6", Native American.

Miki Coyora – 18, black hair, dark brown eyes, 5' 0", Asian.
Frank Pond – 45, black hair, dark brown eyes, 5' 7", Caucasian
Heidi Pond – 40, black hair, dark brown eyes, 5' 3", Caucasian
Abigail Pond – 17, brown hair, brown eyes, 5' 1", Caucasian
Ellie Pond – 16, brown hair, brown eyes, 5' 0", Caucasian
Jessica Darlin – 35, blonde hair, green eyes, 5' 4", Caucasian
Lauren Khanh – 29, black hair, brown eyes, 5' 0", Asian
Manuel Rodriguez – 20, brown hair, brown eyes, 5' 7", Hispanic
Joaquin Valdez – 19, brown hair, brown eyes, 5' 4", Hispanic
Danny Valdez – 16, brown hair, brown eyes, 5' 3", Hispanic
Vincent Gamelli – 46, black hair, brown eyes, 5' 8", Olive skinned Italian
Benito Gamelli – 9, black hair, brown eyes, 4' 5", Olive skinned Italian
Joe Buckley – 56, brown hair, blue eyes, 5' 9", Caucasian, red shirt
Faer'Ah'Ten'Ah – 29, white hair, white eyes, 7' 2", Elf
Seamus Rockbrother – 31, red hair, black eyes, 4' 3", Dwarf
Mae'Tru'Doe – 18, sandy brown hair, blue eyes, 6' 1", Elf
Mag'De'Lenn – 39, green hair, green eyes, 6' 9", Elf
Serpthae – 342, iridescent purple scales, golden eyes, 17' 3", Dragon
Ath'Th'Os – 28, wheat colored hair, blue eyes, 6' 8", Elf
Por'Th'Os – 32, sandy brown hair, teal eyes, 7' 3", Elf
Ar'Uh'Miss – 34, golden hair, green eyes, 6' 7", Elf
Fergal Smith – 21, red hair, brown eyes, 4' 0", Dwarf
Fergus Smith – 21, red hair, brown eyes, 4' 2", Dwarf
Lyta Tallman – 24, red hair, brown eyes, 4' 1", Dwarf
Sean Tallman – 24, red hair, brown eyes, 4' 4", Dwarf

Prolog:

My name is Paul Stephens, I am a Dragonmage of At'Lan'Ti'Ah, and this, my children, is our story. Two years before our family began, I had everything, I was associate pastor at a growing non-denominational church, had a dream day job as a martial arts instructor, and a lovely fiancée, Farrah, who was a police detective. And then, one night, my world was shattered. A gang, that Farrah had been investigating, had tortured, raped, and murdered her. The loss, betrayal, and emptiness was crushing. For weeks I spiraled inward, coasting through each day, in ever increasing apathy. The apathy was followed by rage. Day and night, I was consumed by thoughts of revenge. I plotted murder, and fought the urge to go berserk. When I had managed to get the rage somewhat contained, I sought understanding. "Turn the other cheek" is easier to say than do. I prayed, meditated on scripture, and wept. And then, one day, as I walked down the sidewalk on Sparrow St, I watched two thugs farther down, on the other side of the street, beat a boy, and walk away laughing. Not one of the folks near the boy had done a thing, they had just stood there watching. I hustled across the road and helped the boy up. He told me that he was "OK", and limped away, I was left with the impression that more than anything, he was embarrassed. The episode reminded me of the parable of the Good Samaritan. As I turned the corner I saw the same two thugs approach another boy, in front of "Barry The Barber's" shop. As the thugs began to harass the boy, the Barber's Shop door flew open. A large man with graying side burns, in a Marine uniform, stepped out. He placed himself between the thugs and the boy. The thugs slowly backed off as the Marine advanced, step by step. And then it hit me, "What if the Good Samaritan had rescued the victim instead." As I walked home my mind stayed on the parable of the Good Samaritan, finally, a solution came to me, "What if he not only rescued that victim, but ensured

that there would be no future victims," not revenge, but justice! Now resolved, and at peace, I began to prepare myself for battle. I practiced, plotted, planned, observed, and then, one fateful night, I took action. And that is how I met your mom!

My name is Danny Chin, I am a Dragonjudge of At'Lan'Ti'Ah. My extraordinary story started six years ago. I am leaving this for you, my children. Tomorrow's battle decides the fate of a world, and I want you to have something of your father, in the event that I pass on to join the growing ranks of Dragonheroes, who have paid the ultimate price for the freedom of a world. I suppose the story is best begun at the night when I met your mother, Serelynne Song. I was a detective, working undercover, trying to bring down the gang who had murdered and raped my partner, Farrah Lynne. Things went very bad that night, just before they went very, very, well.

Paul Stephens wiped his sweating hands on the jacket of his Shinobi Shizoku, as he made his way along the shadows leading to the entrance of the alley that Farrah's murderers had just dragged some poor soul into.

Billy "La Cobrita" Vasquez, who was high on adrenaline, and several less than legal substances, was enjoying the exercise of his power. He felt like a general leading his troops to victory, or a king. Yeah, king Billy... As he started kicking the Chink cop, his boys joined in, cheering him, and adding the occasional additional kick of their own. He and his boys had done this dozens of times before. They had it down to a science. They'd kick this piece of shit into a pulp, then slit his throat. Leaving a message, for the neighborhood, and the cops. "You don't fuck with The Raptors!"

Danny Chin knew that he was in a world of trouble, somehow his cover had been blown. After the gang had dragged him into the alley between Jameson's Imports, and Colston's Used Books, they had started kicking the stuffing out of him. He knew that he was a dead man, his only hope was that his death would come sooner, rather than later. The beating he was taking was unendurable. Then suddenly, it stopped.

Paul paused as he worked his way toward the first of the two thugs guarding the entrance of the alley. These two, given the element of surprise, he could handle. Evaluating his chances against the nine thugs remaining in the alley left him not at all certain that he was going to make it back out alive. He decided that he would dispatch as many as he could before they killed him. Moments after resuming his approach, he froze in shock. Two figures, definitely female, also dressed in Shinobi, wearing masks, both with long braided hair, one blonde, one pink, ran silently up to the two thugs from the other side of the alley opening. He watched as they each expanded a pair of tactical batons, and

took the thugs down with lightning fast blows. They had good form. He smiled as he followed them into the ally. It was three on nine now, the thugs' odds had just gotten very bad. Deadly bad.

Serelynn Song followed her twin sister, Raevyn, into the alley, there were nine more of them, a few keeping watch, the rest all kicking the one victim. Nine on two, not the best odds, but she and Rae would make a fight of it. The two at the ally entrance had gone down easily, nearly silently, especially if compared to the groans of the gang's victim. She smiled, the way a shark might, as Raevyn took down the first of the remaining thugs with her batons.

Raevyn took down the outermost gang member, and turned looking for another target. Serelynn passed her and took down another. Four down, five to go. Things got a bit more difficult, she and Sere each had two of the remaining gang members coming at each of them armed with knives, or clubs. She met her closest opponent, she broke his wrist with her left baton, and, as the knife fell, she dropped him with a blow to the temple from her right baton. His partner swung his club at her leg, it hit with considerable force, he dropped it, and started drawing a gun. As she braced herself, intending to make a lunge at him. Raevyn watched as a man, dressed in a Ninja outfit, slid silently up from her right, and took the gunman's hand off at the wrist with a Shinobigatana. He then slit the gunman's throat. She watched as he quickly dispatched Serelynn's lone remaining opponent, and bowed to each of them. Whoever he was, this Ninja boy was good. There were now only three gang bangers standing, they had stopped kicking their victim, and turned at the sound of their gang mates being educated in the finer points of the art of warfare. She hobbled over and quickly took down the leader with two baton blows that shattered his collarbones. Serelynn, and Ninja boy each took down one of the others.

As the bones in his shoulders broke, Billy collapsed in shock, and pain. As he fell he saw some Ninja fucks take down Hector, and Little Eddy. What the fuck! didn't these Gooks know this was Raptor turf! His train of thought left the station as he was introduced to the hard reality of the pavement. Dazed, and in shock, he was rolled onto his face by a painful kick. He lifted his head and saw one of the Ninjas go from one to the other of his gang mates, cutting each throat. The situation was rapidly migrating from "Bad Junction", to "Worse Terminal". Had the gang somehow pissed off the fucking Yakuza? One of the female Ninjas tried to secure his wrists and feet with cable ties, he squirmed, trying to resist. She punched him, in the kidney, hard, and finished securing him. She and the other female Ninja rolled him onto his back...

Danny lay on his side for a few moments, curled into a ball, just breathing and hurting. Then, slowly, painfully, he stretched, and rolled himself into a seated position. As he lifted his head he watched as two Ninja Barbies none too gently, secured Billy Vasquez and rolled him over. Another Ninja, this one male, was coming from the ally entrance, a sword, dripping blood, hanging from his hand. Billy said to them "You are all dead, don't you fucks know who I am?" Danny smiled as he heard the reply of the pink haired Ninja Barbie sitting across Billy's chest, "Oh, yes Billy boy, we know who

you are, you are the raper of little girls, and we suspect, of many a little boy. We gave the 'justice' system a chance to do its job, it failed. It did, however, allow us months to ponder what would be a fitting justice for the raper of little girls, and particularly, of our cousin. The vote was unanimous, castration won by a landslide. We flipped a coin, I lost."

Danny started laughing as the other Ninja Barbie slid a pair of hedge sheers out of a pack slung across her back. She bent down, Danny heard Billy start screaming. Danny had never laughed so hard before, it had never hurt so much to laugh, but he just could not stop.

When the two ladies were finished with Billy, the male Ninja slit Billy's throat. He cleaned his sword on Billy's shirt, sheathed it, walked over to Danny, and, lending him an arm, helped him to stand. Danny looked up at his rescuer's face, and let out a shocked 'Paul!', it was his dead partner's fiance! He hugged Paul, and said, "Thank you!", they turned toward the two ladies, who were watching them. He said, "Ninja Ladies, thank you, thank you!". My name is Detective Danny Chin." Paul said, "My name is Paul Stephens". The pink haired lady removed her mask, and said, "I am Raevyn Song, this is my sister Serelynnne." Removing her mask, Serelynnne walked to Danny's other side and helped Paul to hold him up. Danny said, "You three police the area, make sure that you have left nothing behind, then leave. I will wait 5 minutes, hobble over to the payphone, and call this in. I will tell my superiors that I was made by Billy and his thugs. And that while they worked me over, promising me an excruciating death, I was miraculously saved by a gang of Ninjas. I will opine that it was a rival gang, who had left us all for dead. You three, were, of course, never here." Serelynnne handed Danny a prepaid cellphone in a Ziploc bag "This has no fingerprints on it, is already activated, and can not be traced to any of us. It will save you a walk to the payphone." Danny took the phone, nodded, and said, "If you would like, the three of you meet me tomorrow night at 7 at Adolpho's, we can drink to our lost, and celebrate the demise of their murderers." They agreed. And as they turned to go, he looked down at Billy and laughed, "They are going to love this back at the station."

Raevyn was limping, Paul, or as she had begun to think of him as, "Ninjaboy", slid up to her, wrapped his arm around her and helped her to walk out of the ally. He felt GOOD against her side.

As Paul helped Raevyn walk, he couldn't help noticing how GOOD she felt against his side. It had been just over a year since Farrah's murder, and he had come to believe that he would never get out from under the shadow of her loss. But, after tonight, he felt like he had managed to close one door on the past, and maybe, just maybe, step through another to a new beginning.

Five minutes later, Danny called it in. The black and whites arrived, and began to set up a perimeter around the crime scene. Minutes later a large blue van pulled up, Danny thought that the press had arrived. His jaw dropped when Serelynnne stepped out dressed in a tan pantsuit. She walked over to the officers maintaining the perimeter, showed them some kind of ID and spoke to them. The officers stood a bit taller, and one waved toward Danny. She stepped under the 'crime scene' tape, and

walked over to Danny saying "They tell me you are the officer in charge, I am Special Agent Serelynne Song with the Department of Homeland Security." She showed him her ID. Danny smiled, and said, "How can I help you Agent Song?"

My name is Raevyn Song, I am a Dragoncaptain of At'Lan'Ti'Ah, this, my beloved children, is my story. When I met your father, my heart was a dark, battered, cauldron of storm. He wrapped me in his arms, and his faithful heart led me toward the light....

Raevyn slipped quietly into the back of the 'Church Of The Gospel Of Grace'. She was greeted by two little old ladies with name tags that read, "Doris", and, "Cordelia". They had real warmth in their smiles, and Doris even hugged her. She wondered if they routinely had purple haired, pierced, transgender goth girls drop in. Possibly so, as she passed, Cordelia patted her on the shoulder and said, "Doesn't she look lovely." So far this was exceeding expectations. Oh wait, she was getting "the look" from a few of the "fine folks" toward the front of the church. She straightened up, and gave them back her best "kiss my ass" smile. She spotted Paul behind the back row of seats, over by the far wall. He was squatting down, talking with what appeared to be two 8, or 9 year olds. As she approached she noticed that the "tone" he used to speak with them was not adult to child, but rather, adult to adult. It reminded her of her father, who always treated kids as if they were just as important as adults, that what they had to say was just as valid. She liked that. He glanced over, saw her, and his smile blossomed. She liked that too. The kids left to catch up with their parents. He stood, and gently caressed her cheek, saying, "Hello Raevyn." She whispered, "Hi Ninjaboy" and smiled. He took her into his arms and hugged her. "I am so glad you came, shall we sit back here? I like to anchor the back of the church. Back here, if I see anything that needs attention, or prayer, I can address it. Without folks seeing me, and getting concerned, as they might if I were up on the platform." She agreed, the back was good for her too, she might need to make a strategic retreat.

The service was similar to, but not quite the same as, those she had been in before. There were songs, and a sermon, which was fairly interesting. The Pastor told them that Ephesians two ten said that they were God's workmanship, His work of art. "Poema" in the Greek. That they were "God breathed poems." Poems that God had birthed in His heart, then spoken as a perfect word of art, a masterpiece, that defined them, including all of their potential. That He had provided, and would provide, whatever they required to reach that potential. Their job was to believe, and persevere. She had to admit, it was more interesting, and far more encouraging, than the "fire and brimstone" that she had heard in the past.

After the sermon a little old lady stood up, and the pastor recognized her saying, "Sister Gail?". She walked up to the platform, and one of the singers handed her a microphone. She looked across the room, and said, "I feel a Word upon me, for someone here. 'You have suffered much, lost much, and one you love has lost even more.'" She looked at Raevyn "'But you have stood your ground against the darkness, you have been a shadow and you are a song.'" Chills ran down Raevyn's spine, as tears welled in her eyes. Thankfully, they sang a few more hymns, which allowed her to regain her composure.

After the service ended, a little old gentleman approached her and Paul. He nodded to Paul, "Pastor", and turned to Raevyn saying, "Dear lady, I have a word for you from God. Will you accept it?" She nodded, slowly, wondering where this was going. He smiled and said with a different inflection "I have called you to be a 'Judge in Israel', to stand against evil, and crush the scorpion's tail. Know that I believe in you. I see your weakness, but I also know your heart, it's courage, and strength. Six years from now, you shall soar as a flame, against the darkness crushing a world. I shall lay upon you the mantle of Joshua, and you shall lead warriors of the light. Be victorious!" She felt, FELT, a

warm heaviness fall upon her shoulders, it felt like love, purpose, and peace, all rolled together. He patted her on the shoulder and smiled, saying "You are dearly loved." and walked away.

Church had never been like this growing up, well, maybe that one night when she stood to receive Jesus when that visiting evangelist had led her and several others in prayer. A lot had happened in her life since that night, most of it had caused her to doubt. Not so much to doubt God, but to doubt herself, and many others. Today she felt like maybe, just maybe, some of that doubt had been misplaced.

My name is Danny Valdez, I am a Dragonrider of At'Lan'Ti'Ah, and this is my story...

It was around 15 minutes past sunset, but thanks to this cold, crappy, rain, it seemed like it was much later. Danny was silently cursing himself for agreeing to join "Los Gatos Grande". His brother Joaquin had been a member of the gang for four years. When Joaquin had joined in with the other gang members in putting pressure on him to join, Danny, who had held off for months, finally gave in. In the end, he decided to join because membership in the gang might provide a way for him to survive long enough to graduate from High School. Danny was a Freshman, and a straight A student. He needed to survive the neighborhood long enough to get a college scholarship, and escape.

Tonight's master of ceremonies, Manuel Rodriguez aka "the claw", was waxing eloquent, "Hey, little Danny, tonight we gonna pop your cherry!" Danny opined to himself that this certainly was the pits. The fourth occupant of the car, their driver, the ever silent "Chooch", pulled up to a curb near "Mikes Cafe" on route 70.

As Manuel exited the front passenger's seat, Danny followed his brother out the back passenger's door. Chooch, wasting no time loitering near the scene of the pending crime, left the three of them standing in the rain. Saying "Lets pick a good prize, eh!", Manuel led them toward the cafe's back parking lot, where several 18 wheelers were parked. Danny followed Joaquin, who trailed after Manuel with his head down and hood up. After 5 or 6 minutes of slinking between trucks, Manuel led them back to one with a big "Walmart" logo on it. "This one should have some good electronics, eh" Manuel enthused. "You keep a look out while we do the men's work, eh little Danny?" Danny kept watch at the back of the truck while Joaquin covered Manuel in shadow so it would be harder for anyone to see him as he jammed open the driver's door with a crowbar. Of course he made so much noise doing that, that anyone nearby would know something was going on. At least he hadn't broken the window, which would have made a more recognizable sound.

A few moments later the cab's engine started, and his brother waved him to follow around the front of the truck. Manuel opened the passenger's door, Joaquin told Danny to get in, and ride in the sleeper in the back. As he did so, Joaquin took the passenger seat. As soon as the door was closed Manuel drove them carefully out of the lot, heading East on route 70. It was a two hour drive back to the abandoned warehouse, where they were supposed to meet the rest of the gang to parcel out their haul. Danny sat there in the darkened sleeper, cursing his stupidity, and the lack of options that had landed him there.

Chapter One

My name is Serelynn Song, Dragonqueen of At'Lan'Ti'Ah, and this, my people, is our story:

Ken Northman smiled, hopped down from the Grayson Academy bus, and walked across the Chick Fil A parking lot. Two matching Tardis Blue GMC Savanna Explorer Conversion Vans, license plates

"T4RDIS", and, "TARDIS" pulled up. With the arrival of the Song Clan, his caravan, of high intellect high schoolers, was ready to head out. It was late Friday afternoon, they were going spend the weekend in Kansas City participating in the 23rd annual "Battle Of The Brains" state quiz team championship. This years team of five: Marcus Caine, team leader, Amanda Caine, his sister, Mike Jella, Valen Song, and Galen Song, stood a good chance of reaching the final round, possibly even coming in first. They were well rounded, and well adjusted, well, except for the Song boys, Valen, and Galen were flat out nuts. Their reign as the school's current practical joke kings, had made for some amusing incidents. Not that he would admit that publicly. Joining the team on the trip were Steve Starke, Amanda's boyfriend, and Miki Coyora, Mike's girlfriend.

As the Songs decamped, two young men, whom he did not recognize, got out of the front passenger doors of each van. Once the troops had marched up to him, Raevyn, introduced him to "'Paul Stephens', my fiance, and 'Danny Chin', Serelynn's Squeeze". He smiled as he shook each man's hand, and tried not to "squeeze". Samson "Gunny" Brown, who was driving the bus, had followed him out to the parking lot, was also introduced to them, and no doubt "squeezed" each offered hand, even if he didn't mean to. Gunny was a bear, albeit an Irish bear, with flaming red hair. The introductions now completed, Serelynn handed both he, and Gunny, a Tac-Net ear bud, saying, "We thought you'd each like to stay in easy communication while we drive, their charges should outlast the 4 hour drive several times over. To talk, hold the button, to toggle voice activated mode, double tap it, you will hear a chime." He and Gunny each slipped their earpiece in and tested them.

One of the twin boys, Galen he thought, not Valen, handed Gunny a picnic basket saying: "Mom sent some snacks, she said to 'give the bear a pic-a-nic basket to share with the folks on the bus.'" Gunny laughed and thanked him. The Songs were two sets of Twins, Raevyn and Serelynn were fraternal twins. Though, Ken thought, perhaps "sororal twins" would better describe Serelynn and Raevyn. Valen and Galen, who their family and closest friends referred to as "The Liadens", because of their love of the Liaden series of books by Sharon Lee, and Steve Miller, were identical twins. "Are your parents not joining us?" he asked. "They wanted to, but they each had unbreakable commitments for this weekend." Serelynn replied. This was a common enough occurrence with the Songs, their mother was a well known Science Fiction and Fantasy author, their father worked for Homeland Security, as did Serelynn. He nodded, smiled, waved and said, "Allons-y!", and they all headed for their respective vehicles. His mouth started watering as they all "mounted up" for the trip, "I'll stow the basket if you'd like Gunny" he said.

The downpour was increasing, and visibility decreasing, as Frank Pond pulled the Pond Family's Fleetwood Providence 42M RV off of the ramp from route 10 north, onto the Kansas Turnpike, route 70, East bound. His mind wandered back six weeks, to when he and Heidi, had won the Florida Powerball lottery.

A "Pond Family Conference" was soon convened, after due consideration, it was decided that they would give notice at their jobs, give away most of their stuff, and drop a \$50,000 down payment on the RV. Which they had selected after half an hour of Ebaying, to see what high end RVs might be available, followed by two minutes of Googling for dealers near them. This was followed, the next day, by visits to three of the dealers, a test drive at each, a quote from each, counter offers, the aforementioned deposit, and then followed by four weeks of waiting for the RV to be customized. All of which proved to have been time well spent, when it was finally delivered. The whole family loved the RV, with it's three 30 inch wall slides, they still hadn't gotten tired of telling folks "Its bigger on the inside". Being home schoolers, with nothing to tie them down to Florida, they had decided to set out to see the good old U. S. of A. They were just ending their first full week on the road.

Heidi said, "This downpour is getting worse. We should keep an eye out for a rest area." Frank nodded. Heidi swiveled her seat back toward their daughters, who were watching "Vincent and The Doctor" on the RV's 60 inch Sony flat screen. "Abby, Ellie, this storm is getting worse, buckle up." As she turned back she noticed the back of a Walmart tractor trailer in front of them. Frank slowed as the RV approached the barely moving Walmart truck, he considered passing it, but decided that, with the rain, and lowered visibility, slow was good. Besides, it wasn't as if they were going anywhere special, anytime soon.

Gunny slowed down attempting to maintain some separation between the bus and the large RV in front of them. He checked the rear and side view mirrors, and verified that the two vans rolling side by side behind him were also slowing down. He double tapped the ear bud in his right ear, and after hearing the chime, said, "It looks like we have a bit of vehicular congestion in front of us. I will be slowing down further, to maintain my available reaction time." He heard Raevyn's "Acknowledged." Serelynn also acknowledged, and said, "Also be advised that we have some kind of police or rescue vehicle approaching from behind at speed in this outer lane." He watched as she slowed and dropped her van behind the van Raevyn was driving.

Danny watched as Manuel slowed down, to avoid hitting the "Katsulas & Biggs" home heating oil truck that was crawling along in front of them. From what he could see, there was a flatbed truck in front of it, with some kind of construction equipment on it. Manuel swore as he looked into the rear-view mirror and saw flashing lights approaching in the outside lane around a half of a mile behind them. He followed the other trucks into the breakdown lane and stopped.

After their impromptu convoy had pulled over and stopped in the breakdown lane, Serelynn checked her rear-view and side mirrors. She could now see that what was about to pass them was a rescue ambulance. However, in addition to the ambulance, she could also see a much larger, much brighter series of flashes approaching them. It looked like a very large arch, or, perhaps, the exposed portion of a ring that was also partially underground. It was completely black inside with coruscating edges. It looked to be at about a 5 degree angle away from being perfectly aligned with the highway. As the ambulance passed she said, "Team Alert, turn your vehicle off, and brace for impact. We have some kind of phenomenon approaching from the rear. There is a high probability of EMP damage to our electronics."

Ken shouted for the quiz kids on the bus to buckle up, and brace for a rear impact. Gunny shut the bus off and watched as the headlights on both of the vans behind them went out.

Serelynne watched the phenomenon in her side view mirror as it overtook their van. A FedEx tandem trailer passed them in the West bound lane, and started to pull onto the exit ramp. She watched as the edge of the phenomenon passed through the tractor and the face of the first of the tandem trailers. Moments later the phenomenon engulfed the van, and she was plunged into darkness, cold, and silence. It seemed to last for both a moment, and an eternity.

When she came to herself, she noticed that the rainy night had become a sunny afternoon. From behind her Galen said, "Wormhole!". Nearly simultaneously, she heard Valen say the same thing over the Tac-Net. If the Tac-Net was working, that meant that at least some of their electronics had survived.

They had trained for this, well, not this exactly, but something close enough to it. She started the van, and went into full "Zombie Apocalypse Barbie" mode. "Team alert, full Zombie Bug Out Protocol is now in effect. We need to get the pallet out of Raevyn's van, so we can access the gun safe. Galen, pull the cable from the winch on the front of our van. Valen, pop the back hatch of your van, then grab the duffles with our battle dress, and toss them to the side of the van. Galen, once he has done that, attach the cable. Raevyn get everyone started into their gear. I will pull the pallet out of your van and drag it far enough back for us to access the gun safe."

With the cable connected, she backed the van up until the large 72×54 Lexan™ pallet, which had been designed to take the punishment, had dropped out. She dragged it until there was 5 or 6 feet between it and the back of Raevyn's van. She pulled her van forward, about a foot, put it in park, and shut it off, saying "Rae, while I suit up, open the gun safe. Liadens!" Galen and Valen looked at her. "Since Mom and Dad aren't with us, you'll have over-watch. Rae, 1st priority is to get the Liadens equipped with a standard load out for over-watch." As Serelynne passed the pallet she detached the cable and tossed it under the front of her van.

As she pulled on her battle gear, she took a quick look at the terrain around them. They, along with both sides of the highway, and the other vehicles, had apparently been deposited into a valley. On her left side, running behind her, was a series of low cliffs building up to higher mountains. To the right and forward, was a sparse forest. "Galen also grab a tree blind from the pallet, you are designated 'forest over-watch'. Valen you are designated 'rock over-watch', try to find a decent ledge up on one of those cliffs. Galen and Valen bowed to her, and began collecting the needed gear. Serelynne, now dressed in battle gear, walked over to the back of Raevyn's van.

As her brothers, now equipped, trotted toward their assignments. Raevyn handed Danny and Paul, who were now also in battle gear, their weapons. Each received a belt with a holstered Glock 18, and pouches with spare clips. "Raevyn, bring Gunny and Ken some sidearms, then do a quick survey of the vehicles ahead of us. Send folks back here, Danny, you are with Rae, escort folks in small groups back here while Rae continues her survey. Paul, stand watch over the vans. I will check to see if the driver of that FedEx truck made it." Serelynne said, as she armed herself.

As Raevyn approached the bus, the door opened. Ken and Gunny stepped down. She handed each of them a Glock 18 holstered in a belt which, had two pouches with spare clips attached to it. "We aren't in Kansas anymore Gunny." she said. "Ain't that the truth ma'am." he said as he put the belt on. "You and Ken get the kids back to the vans, in the absence of knowledge to the contrary, we are assuming that this is a hostile environment." Gunny nodded, saying, "If folks are contained in a small perimeter, it will increase our ability to protect them." She nodded and followed Danny toward the very large RV in front of the bus.

Heidi blinked a few times, after the wave of darkness, cold, and silence had passed through her. She noticed that they were in daylight. Both girls called out "Wormhole!" as they unbuckled and came forward to the driver's area. "We could be in a whole new universe, on a parallel Earth." Heidi said.

"Gravity feels the same." Ellie said. "And the sunlight looks the same." Abby added. Frank said, "We definitely aren't in Kansas anymore. Lets all stay put for a few minutes. Lord knows where we are, and whats near by. At least none of us are wearing a red shirt." Heidi tapping the screen of the entertainment center, said, "I am going to see if we can pick up any radio stations." They watched as the screen scrolled through the FM frequencies. After a several passes through the spectrum, it was clear that there was nothing to receive. Heidi changed to AM, which a few minutes later, had yielded the same result, nothing. Frank cycled their CB radio through all 40 channels, all they heard was static. After a few more moments, Abby said, "I'm going to look around". She opened the door, and hopped out of the RV. She stood there for a few moments, looking around, then walked forward, across the front of the RV.

Danny, Manuel, and Joaquin sat there stunned. Danny felt like his mind had shut down, this wasn't possible. He recovered, slowly, but more quickly than his brother or Manuel. This was like a Twilight Zone episode! Eventually Manuel shook his head, as he looked out the window at the blue sky. "What the fuck!" he philosophized. Danny concluded that that was probably about as profound as Manuel ever got. "We ain't in Kansas anymore." Joaquin said.

They sat there for a few minutes, just looking out of the windows of the tractor. Manuel continued swearing under his breath. After a few minutes, Manuel noticed that the truck was still running, he disconnected the wires he had used to hot wire it. Joaquin said, "Danny, you are the smart one, what do you think this is." "Well, it is day time, not night, and the sky is clear. I see the road, but the land beyond it is totally different, lower, and flatter." After a few moments, he added, "I think that blackness was a wormhole. We are probably on a whole other planet, in a different universe, maybe."

They sat there contemplating that for a few moments before Joaquin said, "We might be the only people on the whole planet." "Maybe, or there could be whole new species out there. Something we have never seen before could come out of those woods any second now." Danny said. Manuel thought about that for a few moments, then said, "No matter who is out there, this will be our planet!", as he waved his chrome plated automatic pistol. "Lets go show them that Los Gatos Grande is in charge!" he said to Joaquin.

Joaquin said, "What about the Sheriff in the rescue ambulance? He might still be out there." Manuel laughed, saying "If he is Hommie, we will take him out, then we will have a gun for Little Danny. Are you going to turn pussy on me now?" "No." Joaquin said.

Manuel threw his door open and hopped out. Danny reluctantly followed Joaquin out the passenger door, Joaquin pulled the 38 out of his pants pocket, pointed it down in front of him, and slowly skirted the side of the trailer. As they neared the back of the trailer, Danny, who was not armed, and not skirting the trailer, saw an oriental guy, in a soldier's uniform, pointing a pistol at him. Danny smiled, raised his hands, and put them together over his head. This was not going well, Manuel was a genius, a freaking 'Wylie Coyote' level genius.

As Joaquin and Danny stepped out into the area between the trailer and the big RV behind it, Joaquin saw the soldier and pointed his gun at him. The soldier had already transferred his aim from Danny, who kept his hands over his head, to Joaquin. Danny noticed that another soldier, this one female, was coming up behind the first. She had her pistol pointed across toward the other side of the truck. As Danny turned his head he saw that she was pointing it at Manuel. Manuel had some girl's head in a lock against his chest. He was pointing his pistol at her head. Manuel was going to get them all killed.

Danny Chin said, "Team alert, we have a hostage situation here in front of the RV, two, possibly three perps." Serelynnne was already making her way back from the FedEx trailers. The truck, driver, and the front third of the forward trailer had not made it into this universe. There were FedEx packages sprayed all over the place. As she sped her return up, she said over the Tac-Net, "Rock over-watch, status?" "I have found a suitable ledge, and am just settling in." "Forest over-watch, status?" "I am up a tree, the blind is in place and I have a clear shot on the perp without the hostage, as well as the potential perp with his hands over his head. I do not, repeat do not, have a clear shot at the perp with the hostage."

"Rock over-watch is now settled in, I have a clear shot at the back of the head of the perp with the hostage. Distance is just under 200 yards, winds are minimal. The hostage is approximately 1 foot shorter, and nearly at a 90 degree angle to the left of the line between myself and the perp. I am not very high, the angle of descent should not be a problem. With a round this heavy, and a target this close, there should be minimal deflection."

Serelynnne said, "Shoot cue will be the word 'turkey', you both have weapons release, acknowledge." "Acknowledged, shoot cue is 'turkey'." Said Galen, followed by Valen's "'turkey' is the cue, aye."

Serelynnne made her way up the driver's side of the RV, pointing her Glock forward. She stopped about 8 feet from the thug with the gun, the Glock pointed at his head, Valen was right, he was at least a foot taller than the shaking hostage.

Danny Valdez had to do something, or they could all be dead in minutes. He took a few steps toward Manuel, and said, "Guys this is wrong, she doesn't deserve this, put down your guns." Manuel laughed, "You are such a pussy 'little' Danny." he sneered. Danny turned toward his brother, and said, "Joaquin, please don't do this." "Too late now brother." his brother replied.

Danny worked his way along the back of the Walmart trailer, stopping near the edge. He made sure that he stayed out of the line of fire of yet another soldier, who had come up the driver's side of the RV. He looked Manuel in the eye, and coldly said, "Manuel, you are a fucking idiot, there are more of them, and they are PROS. You are just some street trash, with a stolen gun, that you bought out of the trunk of some dude's car."

Manuel's eyes filled with rage, he pulled the gun away from the hostage's head and began to point it at Danny. One of the female soldiers said, "turkey." Manuel's head exploded. Danny turned to his brother and saw that the front of Joaquin's chest now had a large hole in it. As his brother toppled to the ground, Danny put his head down and cried.

As she holstered her Glock, and walked toward the hostage, Serelynnne said over the Tac-Net, "Team, the situation is over, hostage is safe, perps are down, good shooting over-watchers." She took the girl in her arms, repeating "Its over, you are alright."

As Heidi was about to leave the RV, a man, dressed in combat fatigues, came up alongside it. As he passed the open RV door, he drew his weapon. He was followed by a young woman, similarly dressed.

She drew her weapon, waved Heidi back into the RV, and slowly closed the RV door with her other hand. Frank looked out the windshield and said, "Oh, Lord Jesus, have mercy! He's got Abby." The shocked family prayed as they watched the scene outside unfold.

They saw the young man with his hands over his head plead with the others. Then he confronted the thug who had Abby. They heard him yell, but could not tell what he was saying. The thug pulled his gun away from Abby's head, started to point it at the young man, and the thug's head exploded. Ellie shouted, "Yes!" The other thug had been taken out as well. Heidi rushed to get the door open.

Raevyn watched the folks spill out of the RV and race toward the hostage.

Frank said silent prayers of thanks as they approached Abby. She was crying and the soldier who was holding her, had removed her hoodie, and was wiping the gore off of her face. The hood of her hoodie had protected her from most of it. She looked up, noticed them, and pulled away from the soldier. As Heidi reached her daughter she wrapped her into her arms and pulled her back toward the RV door.

The first female soldier that they had seen, the one who had closed the RV's door, stepped up to them and said, "I am Raevyn Song, this is Danny Chin, and that is my sister, Special Agent Serelynne Song." She pointed toward Serelynne who was now talking to the EMTs from the Rescue Ambulance. "I am Frank Pond, this is my wife Heidi, and our daughters Abby, and Ellie." Frank said as he gestured toward each.

Danny Chin approached the young man and said, "Danny, why don't you come along with us, we are gathering everyone we find, with them all in one place, it will be easier to keep them safe." While Danny Chin was speaking with the boy, Raevyn explained to the Ponds that the rest of their team was at the back of the line of vehicles, protecting the other folks. She suggested that they let Danny Chin escort them there. They agreed. They all waited a few moments as Ellie got a replacement for Abby's hoodie from the RV, then started making their way to the back of the vehicles.

Abby looked back and noticed the boy following them, he was still crying. She had been really scared, but that had not stopped her from noticing when he had begged the others to stop. And he had faced down the jerk who had grabbed her, even to the point of risking his own life. She reached behind her mom, and held out her hand to him, he saw it, and looked up into her eyes. She saw him straighten a bit, then he took her hand. As she pulled him forward, her mom stepped to the side and back, they each put an arm around him. Heidi held the trembling boy, considered his pleading with the others, and how he had put himself at risk to divert the threat to Abby. She made a decision, one she suspected that Abby had already made. She looked to Frank, he smiled and nodded, that settled it. She said, "Danny, thank you for trying to save Abby. I don't know why you three were on that truck, and I don't care. What I do know is that you are smart, brave, and a decent human being. " The boy cried harder. Frank said, "Son, from now on, you are one of us. I am Frank Pond, this is my wife Heidi, you've met Abby, and this is her sister Ellie." Danny said, "Thanks, I am Danny Valdez." Danny Chin spoke up from behind them, "And I am Danny Chin, Danny, do you suppose we could call you 'Dan'? That would cut down on the confusion." Dan said, "Sure." Danny patted him on the shoulder, "Good deal!".

As they rounded the bus Danny Chin said, "Here we are, folks this is Paul Stephens, Ken Northman, and Gunny Brown." Each nodded, or waved, as their name was spoken. "I will leave you in their capable hands and get back to the others." As he turned and headed back to the rest of the team Danny heard Ken saying, "Here, let me introduce you folks".

Deputy Sheriff Jessica Darlin had barely managed to stop the Manticore County Fire And Rescue ambulance before they ran out of road. Whatever the thing that brought them here was, it had overtaken them, and had "lifted" soon after. Leaving her around an eighth of a mile of wet concrete to slow to a stop from 50 miles an hour. After she had managed to stop, she and her partner, deputy Lauren Khanh, had sat there shaking, looking out past the end of the Kansas Turnpike. It pointed at a meadow that ended at a bunch of trees around 500 yards away. "We aren't in Kansas anymore." she heard Lauren say. She looked in the side view mirrors, there were several vehicles behind them. "Those folks behind us might need our help." she said. Lauren nodded.

Jessica made a three point turn, and with the ambulance facing back at the other vehicles, slowly moved forward. Thank God they did not have a patient on-board, they had been on their way to an accident scene, when, whatever it was, had taken them wherever this is. They were probably the only medical "facility" around here.

They were just pulling up next to a construction trailer, with a very large backhoe on it, when she spotted the woman with the gun. The woman, who was dressed in combat fatigues, was rounding the front of a very large RV. Jessica slowed the ambulance down to a crawl, watching the scene ahead of her as it unfolded. She stopped just past the "Katsulas & Biggs" heating oil truck.

She and her partner got out of the ambulance, and drew their .45s. As they worked their way along the Walemart truck she saw a boy holding a girl hostage, she heard the soldier say 'turkey', and then the hostage taker's head was, just, gone! As she and Lauren paused at the back of the truck she saw the soldier holster her weapon and take the girl into her arms. Soon what appeared to be the girl's family collected her, while two other people dressed in combat fatigues, stood nearby, guns ready, swiveling around looking for threats. The woman who had been holding the girl, turned toward her and Lauren. "Please hostler your weapons. I am a Federal agent." she pointed down to the ID hanging down from her belt.

As Jessica ordered Lauren to holster her weapon, and holstered her own, the woman slipped off her ID and handed it to her. She read it, "Serelynne Song, Special Agent, Department Of Homeland Security." "How can we help?" Jessica asked, handing the ID back. Agent Song said, "We are sending that family back to a more protected area at the back of this 'convoy.' If you could, please take your ambulance back there, as well. Once you are back there, please check each of them out, and administer a mild sedative or two, if necessary. We could also use the added protection that another two shooters would provide." Jessica nodded. Serelynne's inflection changed, as she said, "Team, status update, we have two new team members," she read their name patches, "deputies 'Darlin' and 'Khanh', they are bringing the ambulance back to you. Please outfit them with ear buds and get to know them." She addressed the deputies, "Once the situation has stabilized, we can discuss what we need to accomplish in the near future." Jessica nodded to Lauren, and back at their ambulance, "Lets go, at least we have something to do to take our minds off this." she gestured at the surrounding terrain.

After the ambulance passed her, Serelynne said, "Gunny, when the deputies arrive, we will need you up here. I am sorry, but I have a crappy job, that I need done right. Could you escort, and protect, two volunteers with two of the shovels from one of the pallets up here. While you keep watch, please have them search, strip, and bury these two miscreants somewhere down hill and near the forest. I doubt that they will have much of anything useful on them, other than their guns, but we should preserve every resource we can, even their belts and shoes."

While Serelynnne dealt with the deputies, and Danny escorted the Ponds back to safety, Raevyn made her way to the passenger side of the Walemart truck. She entered, and carefully verified that the tractor was empty, closed the passenger's door, and exited closing the driver's door. She passed between the tractor and the back of the home heating oil tanker. She carefully stood on the running board on the passenger's side, removed a small mirror on a telescopic pole from a pocket in her fatigues, and used it to peek into the cab. The elderly man in the driver's seat looked like he had passed out. She opened the passenger door, climbed in, with her gun pointed at him, reached over and checked his pulse. He was dead. She noted the name patch on his red shirt, "Joe Buckley". "We have what appears to be a heart attack victim up here in the home heating oil truck." she announced over the Tac-Net, Gunny could you see that he has a proper burial, somewhere decently away from those two pieces of trash." "Yes ma'am." he replied.

As she hopped out of the cab, Serelynnne caught up with her, they proceeded to the final vehicle, a construction flatbed tractor-trailer with a large backhoe on it. On the back of the trailer, was a large "contractors box" on the right, and a fork truck with honking big tires on the left, the contents of that flatbed might come in handy in the days and weeks to come. They split up each going to one side of the "Vincent Gamelli Construction" trailer.

As she approached the passenger door Raevyn saw a young boy looking out the window at her, he appeared to have stopped, but she could tell, by the tracks of his tears, that he had been crying. She waved. He waved back. She reached slowly for the door handle, and opened the door, saying, "Hi, I am Raevyn, what's your name?" He said, "Benito, Benito Gamelli." She looked past him, and saw Serelynnne opening the driver's door. The driver was just sitting there, he looked catatonic. "Is that your dad?" she asked Benito.

"Yeah. I've been talking to him, and pulling his arm, but he won't answer."

"He is probably in a state of shock Benito, this has been a shock to all of us. I am sure he will be OK in a while. Did you see the rescue ambulance go by a little while ago?"

"Yeah."

"I am going to ask one of them to come back and take a look at your dad, OK?"

"Yes, thank you."

"I am on my way." Jessica, who had heard Raevyn's side of the conversation, said.

"Thanks. OK Benito, she is on her way now."

"Gunny, status?" Serelynnne asked.

"We have moved the bodies of the two perps off of the road. We won't be able to do much about the gore though. I recommend that you move them down the passenger side of the vehicles."

"Thanks Gunny. Hi Benito, I am Raevyn's sister, Serelynnne. And here comes deputy Darlin to check out your dad." A moment later, Jessica replaced Serelynnne in the driver's doorway. "Hi Benito, I am Jessica, it is nice to meet you, lets see how your dad is doing." Benito watched as she lifted his dad's eyelids, and shined a light into his eyes, one after the other, then felt his neck. She opened a red and white box. He heard paper tear, and then she had something in her hands that she snapped in half and waved under dad's nose. His dad snorted, shook, and then was looking around. After a few moments his dad said, "We aren't in Kansas anymore!"

Chapter Two:

A short time later, Serelynnne had issued M16s, and extra magazines, to the three most experienced members of her team, herself, Raevyn, and Gunny. She had also moved everyone onto the Grayson Academy bus, it was the only vehicle that had seating for all of them. "Team, set Tac-Net ear buds to manual." Serelynnne said as she set what looked like a standard office style conference speaker phone down on a box set in the middle of the aisle.

"OK, Valen, Galen, can you hear us?" she said towards the speaker phone. They each answered, "Yes." She glanced around at everyone saying "Welcome to 'God knows where' folks, our daylight is

limited, so we will do introductions later this evening. Wherever we are, it would appear that we are no longer on our 'Earth'. I am Special Agent Serelynn Song, this is my sister, and second in command, Raevyn Song, our brothers, Valen, and Galen, have set up as an over-watch. That means that they are watching over us, as some of you saw earlier. From their higher vantage points, they report that they can not detect any signs of civilization. So, we are here, we have finite resources, which consist of our vehicles, their contents, and ourselves. In the a few hours of daylight left, we need to quickly survey the immediate area, watching for threats, assets, and most importantly, food sources. Based on what we have seen so far, the flora around us looks identical to that on our Earth. We must hope that the fauna will be too.

Rule number one, only groups of three may leave the area around our vehicles, one of whom must be armed. Rule number two, any group that passes out of sight of the vehicles must carry one of the long range comm units, they work like walkie talkies, but they also extend the Tac-Net so that our ear buds can communicate over them. They can be used out to about 4 to 5 miles from here. When we have more time, we will mount a high gain antenna up on the ridge, that will extend the Tac-Net out to 6 or 7 miles. The main limitation at that point will be the curvature of this planet, which I am assuming at this point to be the same as our Earth's. The gravity feels the same, so the curvature probably is too.

For the next half hour, I am going to ask for volunteers, to pair up and go with an armed member of my team, to explore the area. I am exempting Benito, his dad, myself, Raevyn, Abby, and Dan from that. This will give us four teams of three. One team, led by Ken, will explore up the valley. Another, led by Gunny, will explore down the valley. The other two teams will carefully explore the woods, one led by Danny, the other led by Paul.

Unless there is a highly compelling reason, all teams will head back when I give the recall, which will be after they have been out for 15 minutes. Emergencies are to be reported immediately, all other discoveries are to be noted in the spiral bound notebooks which your team leader will give to one of your group, along with a pen. We do not expect you to get very far in 15 minutes, especially the teams exploring the woods.

The armed member of each group will designate one of you as their Lieutenant. If they are incapacitated, then command falls to that Lieutenant. The highest priority is your safety, do not take risks, this is a preliminary exploration, if you run into something, we can check it out in more detail later.

While you are exploring, the rest of us will work on arranging our vehicles with the goal of making us more secure. To that end, please hand Benito your vehicle's keys as we disburse. Any questions? OK teams form up with Gunny, Danny, Paul, and Ken. Ken, please coordinate the volunteers for each group, however, please ask Heidi and Ellie to join your group, and Frank to join Gunny's. Jessica and Lauren, please provide protection for the group remaining. Recall will be in 18 minutes, please be careful, observant, and, most importantly, come back safely."

As the last of the groups left the bus, Serelynn said, "Benito, Abby, and Dan, Rae is going to back this bus up until it is as far back as the back of the end FedEx trailer. Once it is back there, would you please start picking up the loose FedEx packages from the ground, and stack them in the back of the bus. We need to preserve whatever resources we have, God only knows what we might need someday. Lauren, please stand watch over them while they do that."

She handed Vinnie an ear bud, and explained how to use it. "Vinnie, how long will it take you to get your backhoe off the trailer and start moving enough of those concrete dividers so that we can turn the largest of our vehicles around using both sides of the road?" "I think I can have it down off of the trailer in around 10 minutes. To move enough of the dividers would take, maybe an hour or two, working by myself. With a couple of competent helpers, we could do it in around 40 minutes to an hour." "OK, we will see about getting you a couple of helpers once folks get back. In the mean time please get your backhoe, and your bobcat down. We may want to use the bobcat to put the pallet back into the back of the van." "Sure thing!" he said and left the bus on his way to his truck.

"Jessica, could you move your vehicle to around 15 feet behind the last van?" "Sure." "Thanks, once you have moved it, please assist Lauren in guarding our FedEx scavengers. I am going to try to back the RV up along side the two vans. It, and the vans, are our most secure vehicles. The bus can stay back at the FedEx trailer for now, and the Walmart truck can stay where it is, but I will also move the fuel oil truck closer. We need to protect it, all of our diesel engines can run on it. There is virtually no difference between home heating oil, and diesel fuel, except for a dye that is added, to prevent folks from avoiding paying the additional tax on the 'diesel'".

She hopped down and worked her way to the RV, it would need extra space on each side to accommodate it's slide out extensions. The sliders were in at the moment, but it was certain that they would be extended. They were probably going to have to use the RV to sleep in tonight. The vans, along with all of the vehicles, were in the breakdown lane so that gave her plenty of space, if she was careful. Backing up something this large was going to be fun...

She had just gotten the RV settled in, when Ken spoke over the Tac-Net "This is the upper valley expedition, we have found something you need to see Serelynne. I recommend that you bring Raevyn, and Vinnie. We have found a box canyon, about a quarter of a mile up the valley, it ends in a closed entrance in the rock face, It appears to be some kind of dwelling. There are no signs of foot traffic around the outside of the closed/locked door. There is however an open window, around thirty feet up, that is roughly three feet wide, and four feet tall."

She checked her watch, it had been 11 minutes, "All groups, except Ken's, return to base, at a careful pace, acknowledge please." "Acknowledged." each group leader responded. "Thank you all, Ken we will be on our way as soon as I collect some equipment, and Raevyn collects Vinnie."

At she, Raevyn, and Vinnie met Ken at the opening of the box canyon, Serelynne unzipped the duffel she had collected before starting up the valley. She removed a tripod, extended it's legs, and handed it to Raevyn. Raevyn flipped down the spikes on each leg, and drove the tripod into the ground. Serelynne attached a solar powered extender for their Tac-Net to it. The canyon was now included in the area covered by their Tac-Net.

The mouth of the canyon was approximately 150 feet wide, it was oriented at an angle of around 50 degrees toward the upper valley, making it somewhat difficult to notice from the lower portions of the valley. She was planning on changing that. She turned to Vinnie and asked, "Vinnie, how long would it take you to build a ramp down from our 'highway' and grade a crude road around 14 feet wide up to here? That would allow us to park the vehicles in the back of the canyon."

"I can use some of the spilled gravel from the ends of the highway to build a ramp at one of the areas where they highway is closer to the meadow. Maybe half an hour for the ramp. Another two or three hours to grade a path, to be safe, figure 3 to 4 hours total. Less if someone can use the bobcat to build the ramp while I grade the road."

"I don't know how much daylight we have left, but we may want to do it, even if it means finishing after dark. Narrowing the threat axis to just the mouth of this canyon would make it a lot easier for us to defend against an attack. Lets go see Ken's dwelling."

She nodded to Ken, who led them into the canyon. The canyon was around 100-125 yards deep. It's width tapered to around 100 feet wide at the end. Serelynne saw the door, and the open window, about 10 feet from the left canyon wall, and 30 feet up. She noticed a similar window on the right, which was closed. The rest of the rock face was flat but had quite a lot of sparse vegetation on it. It was odd, the vegetation could almost be laid out rectangularly. "Could that be a very large door?" she said pointing. "It looks like it could be." Raevyn said.

As they stopped next to the others, Ken said, "Vinnie, do you think your backhoe, or the bobcat's boom could reach that window?" Vinnie shook his head, "Not a chance, the backhoe can reach up to around 18 or 19 feet, the bobcat maxes out at around 21 feet, that looks like its around 30 feet, neither would reach." They all heard Benito's voice over the Tac-Net, from the conference phone still on the bus, "Uh, Dad, what about using one of the ladders?" Vinnie laughed and shook his head, "I can't

believe I didn't think of that, Benito is right, I have two 40 foot fiberglass ladders tied down along the side of my trailer. Piece of cake!"

"Gunny, status?" Serelynnne said. "We are just about back to the vans." "Good, take two sturdy volunteers, and grab one of the 40 foot ladders tied down on Vinnie's trailer, and run it up here asap. Danny, please grab another volunteer, and bring up the orange stripped duffel from the pallet between the vans, and have the volunteer bring up the lime stripped duffel. Be careful, yours will have C4 plastic explosive, his is the detonation kit. If we can't get in using the ladder, we might have to blow the door open. Vinnie, once Gunny drops off the ladder, he will take you back down to your equipment, train him on the bobcat, and start him on making a ramp at whichever section of the highway seems best. Then start grading, we are burning daylight."

"Uh, Serelynnne, rock over-watch here, have you looked up lately? The Sun has risen since we arrived, I think that this planet's magnetic field is reversed, or it rotates backwards compared to our Earth. It is late morning, not early evening." "Thanks Valen, our day just got a whole lot easier folks! Once they get the ladder up here, Raevyn and I will climb up and enter the rock dwelling." "Uh, excuse me, but, aren't the two of you the most important 'assets' we have?" Heidi said, stepping forward. "Well, it is true that we and our family are the most highly trained, for survival that is. But we are also the most highly trained for urban infiltration. Our training included how to check for booby traps, and how to neutralize them. We are the two best suited for this particular task. But, you do have a point, we will discuss it further at tonight's community meeting." Heidi nodded and stepped back a pace.

By that time Gunny, Steve Starke, and Mike Jella were just arriving with the ladder. As they opened and placed the ladder it was clear that it would be at a very steep angle. Gunny told Steve, Mike, and Danny, who were holding the ladder with him, "We will have to brace and hold the ladder in place while they go up. It is a lot steeper than I would prefer."

Serelynnne pulled two large white 'tyvek' suits out of the duffel she had brought up with her, along with two full face respirators, and four hand held lights. As she and Raevyn pulled on the suits she said, "Jessica, please ask Abby, and Dan, to take one of the notebooks and a pen, and take 4 or 5 minutes to interview each person that they can. Later when we are all together, they can interview anyone that they are unable to interview at this point. Have them start with each other. We need a single page summary of who each of us is, along with any skills, hobbies, interests, or health issues we may have. The folks who are just getting back can take over unloading the FedEx truck." "OK." Jessica said.

Serelynnne buckled her gun belt on over the 'tyvek' suit, clipped two hand held lights onto the belt. She slipped her respirator over her head, but not yet over her face, as she watched Raevyn start up the ladder. Raevyn reached the top of the ladder, pulled her respirator down, and pulled a hand held light off of her tactical vest. She poked it, and her head, into the room beyond the window. It looked to be around 8 or 9 feet deep, and 13 or 14 feet wide. She clipped her light back on her vest and climbed in.

She once again removed the light and examined the whole of the room, stuck her hand out the window while keeping her focus on the one door off to the right, and gave her sister a thumbs up. She then worked her way slowly toward the doorway, examining the floor and ceiling, returning her gaze to the door continuously. She heard Serelynnne scuffle into the room, followed by "I'm in."

Raevyn moved to the door, looked out both ways, and stood just inside it to the right. Serelynnne slowly passed her, and moved cautiously into the hallway beyond the door. They leapfrogged their way down the hallway carved out of solid rock. When they reached an opening at the end they could see into a very large chamber. There was a stairway going down into the chamber at their feet. A matching stairway across the chamber likely went up to a matching hallway, and the room with the closed window that they had seen from the outside.

They worked their way down the stairway, and stood back to back, Serelynnne facing "into" the chamber, and Raevyn facing toward the side of the chamber facing out toward the canyon. They took a few moments to shine their hand lights across the chamber, it's floor, and ceiling. Raevyn noticed that there were two very large pistons attached to the wall adjacent to the canyon that ran diagonally across

to the other side of the chamber. Where they met that wall of the chamber, she saw large pipes, around 8 or 10 inches in diameter, a very large metal wheel attached to a valve in the pipes, and a 5 foot long lever. Serelynnne had been right, there was a large door attached to the apparatus. It would swing the door in and to her left. The small door that they had see from outside must be somewhere to her right.

Serelynnne said, "The chamber behind us just seems to keep going back until the light is too diffuse to reveal what is back there. Nothing but us has disturbed all of this dust for quite some time. Lets get the others. We can explore the back side of this chamber with their help."

They worked their way along the right side of the chamber, till they found 3 doorways, each the beginning of a hallway. The first one, which Serelynnne explored while Raevyn covered her back ended in a blind wall. "This one ends in a blind wall, but I saw 'murder holes' along the wall that is adjacent to the middle hallway. My guess is that the 3rd hallway is also a blind, and equipped with murder holes. I will verify that before you go down the middle one."

Once she had indeed verified that the 3rd hallway was a mirror image of the first. She stayed back while Raevyn proceeded down the middle hallway. "I am at the door. It is barred with a large iron beam, resting in two sets of iron braces, I will need your help to lift it." "On my way." Once Serelynnne arrived they both lifted one end of the beam, which seemed to weigh around three or four hundred pounds, and slid it along the outer brace on the far side. Once it had fallen out of the way, they pulled on the door by its iron braces. It moved easily after it had broken away from the crud that had collected in it's joints.

When they had stepped outside, Serelynnne and Raevyn pulled off their respirators. As they removed their tyvek suits, Raevyn gave the others a quick report on what they had discovered ending with, "It is really dusty in there, it looks like it has been a very long time since anyone has lived there." Serelynnne stepped to the door, turned and said, "For now, let's leave the apparatus, and the potential 'garage' door alone.

Although I would like two of you to stay out here and use the ladder to see if you can scrape away that vegetation and expose the 'crack' of the door. Maybe we can get it open later. Danny, please stay out here and guard them, and this door.

Raevyn, please coordinate a search of that chamber. Stow the C4 and detonation kit just inside the door. I am going to check on Vinnie, and Gunny's progress, and escort the rest of our folks up here, that chamber will be far safer for them." She started down the canyon, toward the meadow.

Galen had just finished a power bar, and was washing it down with some Gatorade, from the small duffel he had carried with him, when he heard movement in the woods behind him. Something was coming through the brush, and not being very quiet about it.

Serelynnne had rounded the canyon opening and was starting down the valley when she heard, "Team alert, forest over-watch here, I have fast paced movement through the woods behind me, headed toward the meadow." over the Tac-Net. "Forest over-watch, unless you have an emergency, maintain radio silence until further notice." Serelynnne said as she turned to face the woods and checked that the safety was off, and that her M16 was set to semi-automatic. She didn't want to waste ammunition. "Gunny, park the bobcat, and get up here asap." "Will do." he replied.

Galen looked down and to his right and saw a large female deer burst past his position. He started to relax, but then heard additional movement behind him. The thought occurred to him that something had made the deer run, likely something nasty.

As Gunny ran up the valley toward Serelynnne, he devoted half of his attention to the woods. A large doe burst out of the woods, heading diagonally up the valley. He dropped to one knee as the deer passed him about 20 yards away. He sighted his M16 on it, and put a three round burst into the side of it's chest. It carried on for a few more yards before crashing to it's knees, and falling onto it's side. As he got back up Serelynnne angled down to the deer, with most of her attention on the woods. She put a single shot from her Glock 18 into the doe's head. Gunny reached her side and said, "She should make a nice dinner for us tonight." "Indeed." Serelynnne said.

"Team alert, rock over-watch has multiple unknowns moving through the trees just inside the woods. They are centered around the location where the deer entered the meadow. The shadow, brush, and trees, make further identification impossible."

After a few moments, three large, hairy, bipedal creatures stepped out of the woods. "Ogres!" Valen said over the Tac-Net. "We do not know if they are friendly or not, we will proceed with caution, assuming them to be neutral until we are given an indication to the contrary." Serelynnne said. She waved at Gunny to fall in at her left, and started to slowly proceed down toward the creatures with her M16 leveled but pointing a few feet to their left. He pointed his a few feet to their right.

Serelynnne stopped about 15 feet from the creatures. They were looking at her and Gunny, sniffing the air, and grunting. Each held a large club with one hand, with the club's head resting on a shoulder. They were between seven and eight feet tall, and she estimated their weight at 400 to 500 pounds. Their upper bodies were very broad, and they were hairy all over.

Gunny whispered, "If Chewie were gray, naked, and ugly, he'd look like them." When he spoke, the creature in the middle growled, strode forward, grabbed it's club with both hands, and started to swing it at Gunny. Gunny swiveled and hit it in the chest with a pair of 3 round bursts from his M16. It staggered, glared at him, fell to it's knees, and then flat on it's face.

Serelynnne said, "Back, slowly." As they backed up the other two lunged at them swinging their clubs. Gunny put six rounds into his opponent's chest. Serelynnne shot her opponent in the upper leg with several 3 round bursts. Hoping to incapacitate it but not kill it. They might be able to interrogate it later, somehow. She waited while Gunny quickly changed magazines, then changed her own, as they continued to back farther away from the edge of the woods.

"Forest over-watch, respond by clicking, are you aware of any more of these creatures in the woods." She heard one click, which meant affirmative. "Give me an estimate, 1 click for less than five, 2 for less than 10, 3 for less than 20, 4 clicks for more." She heard 1 click. "OK, click once for each creature please." She heard two clicks. "Can you take them down?" She heard a "pop" followed a moment later by another "pop", followed by one click over the Tac-Net.

"Paul, Ken, and Jessica, please report to my location, bring extra mags, and an M16 for Galen. We will do a reconnaissance in force to ascertain if there are any more of these creatures in the woods. Danny instruct the folks you are guarding that at the first sign of trouble they are to close and bar the door. If they have to bar it, they are only to open it if they hear rapping to the cadence of 'Shave and a haircut, two bits.' You will then join Lauren and the two of you will escort the rest of our ducklings up to the dwelling. Once they are all up there, Lauren will stand guard over the rock dwelling, while you stand watch between Vinnie and the woods. We need him to keep working, we must finish that road." She went over and checked the creature that she had shot in the leg, it had bled out and died.

As the group fanned out and slowly advanced into the woods, Galen dropped out of his tree and accepted an M16, and some clips, from Serelynnne. She gave him a quick hug and they separated, Galen gestured in the direction that the creatures had come from.

Chapter Three

Raevyn looked over and saw Frank Pond standing by the "garage" door apparatus. He was shining his light over it, and humming as she walked up. "Oh, hi. This is quite ingenious." he said. "They are using that large waterwheel, to drive these gears, which operate the door. That lever toggles between 'open' and 'close'. There is an incredible amount of mechanical advantage being applied, I'd guess that the door will move very slowly, but also very smoothly. Shall we try it?"

Raevyn considered it. The door was more than large enough to pass their vehicles into the chamber, which they had begun calling "the tunnel". The tunnel went back, and up, another 300 yards before ending in the closed face of another door, which they were now referring to as the "back door".

The back door appeared to be controlled by an apparatus located on the other side of the door. There were numerous smaller doorways, leading to more hallways, and other chambers of various sizes. Folks were still exploring those. So far, none of the doors and hallways had led beyond the "back door".

The tunnel was uniformly wide, around 60 feet or so. The area inside the garage door was level for around 70 or 80 yards, followed by a moderately steep grade up around 180 yards, followed by a level area of around 40 or 50 yards, which ended at the back door. If they could open the garage door, they could get their vehicles in, then close it. She could station a 2 or 3 person watch on the back door, they would be far more secure "inside". Serelynnne was still scouting the woods, and needed to maintain operational silence. Raevyn made the decision. "Go for it!."

Frank turned back toward the group of high schoolers standing nearby, "Steve, Mike, and Marcus, could you give me a hand? We need to turn this wheel counter clockwise." Raevyn watched as Frank and the boys turned the wheel. The Ponds were good people, they stepped up whenever there was work to do, not all of it pleasant. They also weren't afraid to stand up and voice, what on the whole were well reasoned, opinions.

She smiled to herself as the wheel started to turn. She soon heard a splashing sound coming from behind and below the wheel, she peeked over the apparatus and saw an increasing flow of water splash down onto the waterwheel. Moments later, there was a slight groan from the apparatus, soon followed by a scraping noise coming from the door. Folks started cheering. Several minutes later she saw daylight through a crack on the side of the doorway. It was indeed moving, very, very slowly.

The group searching the woods had penetrated about half a mile into the woods in the direction that Galen had indicated, without finding any sign of additional creatures. Serelynnne whispered over the Tac-Net, "Halt. If there were any other creatures, they appear to have bugged out. We will form two squads, I will lead the folks to my left, Galen will lead the folks to his right. We will turn back and walk at a 10 degree angle to our back trail. This will widen our survey of the woods, but still keep us close enough for one squad to reinforce the other if need be." They made it back to the meadow without additional incident.

"OK, the woods seem to be devoid of threats for the moment. We are going to need firewood, please carefully scrounge up what lies fallen in teams of two, one will keep watch while the other collects, we will pile it 20 feet out of the woods directly across from the bobcat. Galen, collect your gear and the blind from the tree." After they had fanned out and retrieved a substantial amount of brush and small and medium sized branches, she had them regroup into teams of three each so two of them could haul larger branches out into another pile. Fifteen or twenty minutes later Serelynnne estimated that they had more than twice as much as they would need to get through the night. She did not know if she could count on the woods being safe tomorrow, so she wanted to have at least an extra day's supply.

Gunny had left the bobcat parked off toward the meadow, about half way up from the highway to the canyon. Danny was sitting in the bucket facing the woods. "Gunny, please take the bobcat and scoop up our dinner, drop it just outside the dwelling on the right side. Then come haul this firewood up and deposit half of it about half way into the canyon, and the other half near the dwelling on the same side as Bambi. Once that is done, please swap the forks for the bucket and get my precious pallet into the back of my van." "Aye ma'am!" "Thanks Gunny, you are a rock."

She walked over and waved Vinnie down when he next passed where she was. "How are we doing?" she asked. "I think I have the road graded enough that in a pinch we can get the vehicles up, I'd like to take 15 or 20 more minutes to clean it up a bit more though."

When Gunny neared the dwelling to drop off dinner, he saw that the "garage" door was open by about 15 feet. As he dropped the deer off to the side, he noticed that the door was in motion, slow motion, but still motion. He smiled as he backed up to swing down and get the firewood. "Serelynne, be advised that it appears that we will have inside parking available tonight. Would you prefer that I drop the firewood off closer to the dwelling?" "Raevyn, status please." "Sere, we have the door about one quarter open, I estimate that we will be able to pull vehicles into the dwelling in around 30 minutes. The door is designed to open very slowly, but it is opening." "OK, Gunny put that half of the firewood inside, Sere will show you where she thinks it will be best out of the way. And the other half about 50 feet past the deer toward the meadow." "Will do!" "Raevyn, can you get a couple of volunteers to butcher the deer?" "Will do!"

Heidi, Abby, Ellie, Dan, and Benito were exploring the tunnel. On the right side of the tunnel, just down from the "back door", they spotted a wheel connected to a large valve. Piping ran down from out of the wall with the "back door" through the valve, to piping of slightly smaller diameter that went up and across the "roof" over their heads. "I think we just found the way they wash the floor." Heidi said. "Or how they release the boiling tar." Ellie said. Heidi laughed, and said, "Girls, go fetch your dad and a few of those boys who helped him open the door please. Oh, and you'd best ask Raevyn to join us too."

A few minutes later she showed Raevyn and Frank the wheel, pipes, and suggested that now that the door was opening, perhaps it was a good idea to clean up the floor. "I have been noticing that all of the doorways along the tunnel are elevated by around 6 inches. Perhaps that keeps the water flowing down and out the garage door." Heidi said. "Come to think of it, the areas to the sides of the dwelling outside were also elevated." Frank added.

Raevyn tapped her ear bud, "Folks, we have found what we think is the cleaning system for the tunnel floor, we are going to give it a try, do not be surprised if you see a river of muddy water heading your way. It would be a good idea to move into the side rooms, their doorways are elevated by around six inches, they should stay dry." She stopped pressing her ear bud and said, "Gentlemen, if you would do the honors." She stepped back against the "back door" and motioned the ladies to join her. The wheel was around 3 or 4 feet "uphill" of the pipes that would spray, but she wanted a few more feet of safety. Who knew how long it had been since the system was last used.

As the guys turned the wheel, slow drops of nasty looking water started to fall from most of the holes in the piping. "Lets let it run at this rate for a minute before we open it up further." Frank said. For the next few minutes they opened the valve further every 30 seconds or so, until the water coming out appeared to be mostly clear. Then they opened the valve fully. The water sprayed out at about a 15 degree angle landing several feet "down river". It was clearly washing away the dust. "After about 5 minutes, lets turn it off and see how much it accomplished. If need be we can start it again." Raevyn told them.

When they had shut it down, she led them down the slope slowly, reminding them that it might be slippery until it dried. They discovered that they had managed to clear about a third of the tunnel and decided to all go back up and turn it on for 15 minutes longer. No one wanted to wade in the sludge it had left behind. Raevyn told Gunny to leave the half of the firewood for outside first, and then leave the half for inside second. When he saw the river of sludge coming out of the now half open garage door and running down the middle of the canyon, he understood why.

While Vinnie finished the new "road", and Gunny loaded the pallet into the van, Serelynne walked back up to the canyon to check on how things were progressing at the dwelling. She was not well

pleased with the mud she was wading through. The vehicles should manage to get through it alright though. And she did have to admit, when she walked through the garage door, that the place was cleaner. To be honest, she had worried about folks breathing the dust that they had been kicking up.

She was met just inside by Raevyn and Heidi Pond, who offered to give her a quick tour. She agreed. "This series of rooms appears to be barracks, they have raised platforms that must be beds, so far as we can tell they were carved out of the rock when the room was made. Each of the barracks has four smaller adjacent rooms. They appear to be something like Sargent's or Commander's quarters, a storage room, lavatory, and an eight person shower room. The lavatory, and showers have hot and cold running water. In most of the storage rooms, we've found kegs of oil for the lamps." Heidi pointed at the lit lamps in the corridor, and in the rooms. "There are ventilation holes in the roofs and in the walls near the floor. There is a definite laminar flow in every room larger than a closet. Whoever designed this place did an amazing job."

Raevyn told her sister "Heidi, and Frank, have been of immense help. With Ken focusing on managing the people, and with the Ponds focusing on exploring this facility, I have been able to focus on what will be necessary to secure it. As you will see in a bit, we will need team of 3 to keep watch on the back door, and three at the garage door. But otherwise, with the doors buttoned up, we will be very secure. Unless there are trap doors and hidden passages that we don't know about."

Heidi led them across tunnel, through a doorway, and into a hallway saying "These rooms appear to be set up as forges, mills, and other work areas. We found a series of storerooms over here, with raw materials, and more kegs of oil. We also found this armory." Heidi opened a wooden door, and Serelynn saw row upon row of crossbows hanging on poles jutting out from one wall, another wall had stacks of long pikes ending in large blades. There were rows of stacks of wooden boxes with hundreds of crossbow bolts face down in each. On another wall hanging from pegs by somewhat decayed belts were swords in scabbards. In one corner there were 4 stacks of round shields around 3 feet in diameter. There was a forest of short, almost stubby maces, standing on their heads. She tried to lift one, it weighed like twenty five pounds. There were wooden barrels with what looked like 8 inch diameter, 4 pointed shuriken. Lastly there were axes, some with wooden handles, others made of solid metal. All of the weapons were coated with oil, and over time had picked up very little dust. Heidi led them back out and down the hall, "And here we have the start of the food store rooms. We have explored several of them, but most of them have only gotten a quick walk through by one person. There seem to be around 50 of them. This one here has more kegs of oil." Serelynn was stunned, there were hundreds of what looked like 4 or 5 gallon kegs in the room. "We spot checked, they all seem to be full. We might do a test, mix some of this oil 50/50 with home heating oil, my guess is we can extend our oil supply, maybe indefinitely, if we can use the oil all by itself." "Our vans were customized, their engines can run on pure vegetable oil. As can our generators." Serelynn replied. "It is also a trivial process to convert most vegetable oils into bio-diesel." Raevyn added.

Heidi said, "We also found several water powered shafts in the work rooms, we could also use those to generate electricity, or to provide mechanical power to devices we might build" as she led them out and down the corridor. Serelynn noticed that someone had used chalk to number each door, S1, S2 etc. In S23 Heidi showed her wax sealed barrels that she said were filled with rice. In S24 the barrels were filled with corn. In S25 they were filled with some kind of beans. Heidi said, "Given the dry conditions, it looks like however long these have been here, they are all in pristine condition. We won't starve. We broke the seals on one barrel in each room, then rolled them to the kitchens."

Heidi led her down to the end of the corridor, which opened into a series of kitchens, with stone hearths, stone counters with sinks, and running hot and cold water. "Our best guess is that the hot water is generated by running a passage with clear water from a mountain spring, or river, along side a passage with water from hot springs, the heat would transfer to the clear water. We have NO idea how they managed that. We cleaned up, and are using, this kitchen, because it is the one that is closest to the smallest of the dining halls. Ken found volunteers to prepare our dinner for tonight." Serelynn saw

several of the high schoolers wave as they passed them.

Heidi led them into a hall that looked like it could seat around 100. "This is the smallest dining hall, we have cleared and cleaned up the tables nearest the kitchen." "You all have accomplished a lot in the past few hours!" Serelynnne said. "This place is a Godsend." Raevyn said. "You've been a tad busy yourself." Heidi said and smiled.

Serelynnne rushed back outside the dwelling, taking Frank, Galen, and Raevyn with her. They started down the meadow, it looked like they had around half an hour of daylight/twilight left. "Gunny is my pallet loaded?" "Aye ma'am!" "Good job! As always. Vinnie, great job! Can you drive your tractor trailer up and park it up by the 'back door' of the tunnel, leaving around 30 feet between it and the door? Gunny, guard him while he hooks up the trailer, until he starts up the meadow. Then bring the Walemart truck up and park it just where the tunnel starts to slope up on the left, leave about 20 feet of sloped tunnel behind it. The slope will help us unload it, and we can reserve the level part of the tunnel for the other vehicles. The rest of us are making our way down to you. I will drive the bus up and park it on the right side in line with the Walemart truck. Jessica, please drive the ambulance up and park it on the level portion of the tunnel about 20 feet behind the bus. Rae, you and Galen escort Frank down to the RV, Frank park it behind the Walemart truck, level with the front of the ambulance. Rae, and Galen, after you have seen Frank safely to the RV, you will drive the vans up and park them next to the RV. We will put the Heating Oil truck, the bobcat, and the backhoe in last. That tunnel is wide enough that we will have a lane between the two rows of vehicles that, along with the spacing between vehicles, will allow us to move any of the vehicles as needed. Tomorrow we will see what is in the Walemart truck. And work on getting the remainder of the packages out of the FedEx trailers and into safety." As her group walked up the ramp to the 'highway', they were passed by Vinnie in his rig, followed by Gunny in the Walemart truck, she certainly hoped the motto on it's side would prove true. "If you need it, we've got it! Walemart."

As Vinnie brought the backhoe up and through the half opened garage door, followed by Gunny in the bobcat, Serelynnne started walking down toward the meadow, tapped her ear bud and said, "Rock over-watch, super job, you are released, come down, I will meet you, and we will walk up and get some dinner!" "Ye haw!" Twilight was pretty nearly fallen by the time she and Valen got back up to the canyon. As they neared the garage door, Serelynnne noticed that there were a pair of fires around 30 feet out from the wall. One of them had the entrails of the deer burning in it.

The garage door was slowly closing. Frank met her just inside the door and told her "The door should be fully closed in around half an hour. Heidi said to tell you that dinner will be served in around 45 minutes." "Excellent!" Valen said. "Thanks Frank, that will give us time for a quick shower!" Serelynnne said. She turned to her brother, "No, we are NOT naming it 'Jelaza Kazone!'" Frank looked at her inquiringly, "Jelaza Kazone is the home of Clan Korval, in the Liaden series of novels written by.." "Sharon Lee, and Steve Miller, our family LOVES that series!" Frank shared a smile with Valen, who bowed toward him. Frank laughed.

Serelynnne made a trip to the van, retrieved the duffel, that she had packed for the weekend in Kansas City, from the back seat. She then headed back down to the barracks for a quick 10 minute shower. With her shower completed, she discovered that she was quite looking forward to dinner. She had munched a few power bars as the day had progressed. She wasn't exactly starved, but she was really looking forward to a nice venison steak. She wondered if they had potatoes on this world.

She had ordered her team to swap out their ear buds, the ones that they had been using were back in their sockets in the chargers in the vans, the replacements should be good for just over twelve hours. Galen had placed an extender at the open window in the rock face so their net would work whether the vans were inside or out.

She caught up with Raevyn and the two of them made their way to the dining hall. As they entered, Ken and Frank met them, each had a clipboard in hand. "These are the Curricula Vitae that you had Dan and Abby compile on folks. I've added a single page summary, along with another page with

suggested roles that we will need to fill, and who it appears might best fill those roles." Ken said. "This is the Walemart truck's packing slip, there are a LOT of things on that truck that will come in handy." Frank said, then in a whisper "It has chocolate on it." Raevyn said, "Thank God! my mouth is watering already." "Oh, we can't eat it!" Frank said, "It could be worth its weight in gold as a trade item. Assuming that there are any natives out there who we can trade with. As useful as the things on that truck, and on the FedEx trailers, might be to us. They might have far more value as trade goods." Serelynnne smiled, she had just found her master trader. "After the busy day we have had, I am inclined to peruse those before dinner. Then, after dinner, make a few announcements, one of which will be that we will all sleep in tomorrow. Lets plan on having a community meeting, and to go over things in more detail after lunch tomorrow."

She flipped through the 4 page packing list, Walemart had aimed itself toward being an "upscale" competitor to Walmart. Consequently most of the items on it were top end merchandise. The 90 inch Ultra High Def flat screens were nice, but the laser printers, and multifunction copiers, and laser/copy paper could turn out to be priceless. Thank God there were dozens of toner refills as well. They could make paper, it was trivially easy, but making paper consistent enough to not jam in a laser printer, might be harder. She laughed, "96 spray bottles of Instalove Unisex Body-scent. Ewww!" Frank said, "It might make a great trade item, maybe for the Ogres." "Ogre Instalove!" Raevyn laughed.

Everyone pitched in, bringing large stoneware bowls of beans and rice, stoneware platters heaped with venison steaks, large loaves of bread and smaller bowls filled with honey out from the kitchen, and laying them out in the middle of 4 of the tables. As folks settled in, 5 or 6 to a table Serelynnne addressed them "We will talk after we have all eaten. Does anyone object to my saying a word of thanks for our survival?" When everyone had signified that they did not object, she began, "Lord, thank You for our surviving this amazing day. Thank You for providing us with this place of safety, and bounty." Most folks said, "Amen" as Serelynnne sat.

Paul Stephens, who was sitting with Galen, Valen, Abby, Ellie, and Dan, said, "Would anyone here like to add their own thanks?" Ellie said, "I would!" He nodded to her. She said, "Lord, thanks for Dan, Valen, and Galen standing up for, and rescuing Abby. And thank You for eliminating Manuel's genes from the gene pool." Paul put his hand on Dan's shoulder and gave him a reassuring squeeze, saying "Lets eat!" There was little conversation around the table until most of them had finished eating. "*Abby is hot.*" Valen thought. "*I think Ellie is cuter, and she is witty, I like that.*" Galen thought back. "*Are you sure we shouldn't tell anyone that, since we've arrived here, we have been able to hear each other's thoughts?*" "*Are you crazy? Think of the great practical jokes we can pull off with this ability!*" "*But we are agreed? If there is an emergency, or other real need, we will reveal it?*" "*Agreed!*"

Abby said, "This sucks! Now we will never know who they picked to replace Capaldi! Life in this universe is going to be SO boring, well, when we aren't being kidnapped, or attacked by Ogres." Galen turned to her, "We have over 4 million ebooks, all DRM free, they take up just under 4 Terabytes of space. They were updated every 3 months. We have over 120 Terabytes of audio recordings, mostly music. And over 500 Terabytes of video recordings, we won't get bored." "Sweet!, but, Is that legal?" Abby asked.

Valen answered, "Our dad heads up the Civilization Sustainability Division of the Department of Homeland Security. Nicknamed 'The Zombie Apocalypse Task-force.'" Galen shared a smile with his brother, and said, "That is why we call Serelynnne and Raevyn the 'Zombie Apocalypse Barbies'." Valen added, "The vans are designated as branches of the Library Of Congress, we have a license to any work, print, audio, or video, available in the LOC, in any format. In the event of a catastrophe, there are over two thousand teams, dozens in each state, each team is equipped with vans like ours. Each van has

two redundant rack-mount servers, each with 640 Terabytes of RAID 6 storage. The concept is to preserve as much of our knowledge, and culture, as possible even given the worst possible scenario. If just one team survives, five, ten or twenty years after a catastrophe, the intent is that they would be able to rebuild civilization. The teams are usually built around family units, like ours." Galen seamlessly took up the explanation, sharing smile with Valen, "To qualify a team must meet rigorous physical standards, a majority of the team members must score at least in the 95th percentile on IQ tests. Our whole family are Mensa members." "Ours too!" Ellie said. "Team members all get basic, and survival training, maintain that training with quarterly drills, and pass a yearly proficiency review." Valen said as the brothers continued to pass the conversation back and forth. "That is why we were so quick to get set up, we've been training for this for over 3 years now." "Gunny went out with us on 3 drills last year, and Paul and Danny went out with us on the last drill." "Anyway, that is why we have so many ebooks, movies, TV series, and so much music." "Oh, and we, personally, have everything Baen published, up to about two weeks ago, we are bundle buyers, and we grab most of the eARCs that they put out. They are the best publisher of Fantasy and Sci-fi." Valen said. Galen nodded, "We will let you borrow a tablet, we have around a dozen 3.5 inch Android Lollipop tablets that we use to read ebooks, using the Coolreader app. It is totally customizable, and, for a free app, amazing." Ellie said, "I use Coolreader, I love it. Abby prefers FB Reader. Mom and dad use Moon Reader." she rolled her eyes.

As folks were finishing up what turned out to be a very unassuming, but quite filling, dinner, Serelynnne stood saying "I know that we had planned to have a meeting tonight after dinner, but I think today has been long enough as it is. I have a few announcements, then once we have cleaned up the aftermath of our dinner, we should all find a place to sleep. Announcement one: I will need two teams of 3 to keep watch at the garage and back doors." Heidi stood up, and waited until Serelynnne nodded to her to speak "Might I suggest that you exclude any of your team from the watch? You have all had a long, tough, active day. You should all get a full night's sleep. We all need you at your most alert tomorrow." "Point taken, I will adopt that with one modification, two of our team will sleep with each watch. They can be awakened if there is need. We will go with three 3 hour watch shifts at night, and then three 5 hour watch shifts in the daytime. Announcement two: Ken Northman will be our human resources coordinator. He will coordinate the watches. Tomorrow, after reviewing the summaries that Dan and Abby have worked up, he will interview each of you. When we have a personnel need, he will ask for volunteers, and if necessary assign people to perform needed tasks. As you all are aware, given the past twelve hours, if we are going to survive here, we need one another, including what is in each of our heads. Announcement three: Heidi and Frank will manage our facilities, and possessions. For small tasks, they can ask any of us to volunteer, for larger needs, please coordinate with Ken. Each of our vans has 8 sleeping bags, and 8 inflatable beds. With Frank, Heidi, Abby, Ellie, Dan, and Benito sleeping on the RV, there are just enough sleeping bags and inflatable beds for the rest of us tonight. There are more packed on the Walemart truck. We will all sleep in tomorrow morning, and eat a leisurely breakfast, then I will ask for volunteers to unload the FedEx trailers into the bus. While we do that, others will unload the Walemart truck. There will be a community meeting after lunch, in it we will get to know each other, and discuss the future. Tonight Raevyn and Paul will bed down with the back door watch, I and Danny will bed down with the garage door watch. That is it, unless anyone has anything that can't wait till after lunch?" she waited a few moments, "OK, lets get dinner cleared up and get some much needed sleep."

Chapter Four

Paul gradually came to wakefulness, stretched his muscles, and checked his watch. It was 8:37 Am, local time. By mutual consent, Sundown the night before had occurred at 8 Pm. He had slept for about 10 hours, not bad. Raevyn was still sleeping next to him, Lord she was beautiful! He lay there watching her breathe, thanking God for her every breath. They had been engaged for nearly a year now. He reached a decision, it was time. He got up, rolled up his sleeping bag, left it on his airbed, and went in search of breakfast.

He soon discovered that breakfast consisted of a large bowl of oatmeal, some cornbread, and a small bowl of honey. Which he took, along with a large mug of tea, to an empty table. No sooner had he sat down, than Steve Starke, sat across from him, with a mug of tea. Steve was one of the quiz team, no wait, Paul thought, he was the boyfriend of Amanda, who was one of the quiz team. "Pastor, do you have a few moments?" "Sure Steve, what can I do for you?" "I have a cousin who is a transsexual, like your fiancée. And, well, my parents, and the folks at our church, they teach that being transsexual is wrong. I love my cousin, and, well, I would like to feel secure in my heart that she is going to be with me in Heaven someday. With you being a pastor, and engaged to a transsexual, I imagine that you have worked it all out, and maybe you could share your understanding with me. Please?" Paul reached across the table and clasped the young man on the shoulder, "Steve, I would be honored to do so. Do you recall when Jesus said to the thief on the cross, 'Truly I tell you, this day you will be with me in Paradise?'" Steve nodded. "Well, we both know that Jesus, and the thief, left their bodies behind when they died." Steve nodded again. "Yet that thief, everything that made him a 'you', was with Jesus in Paradise. Jesus had not yet ascended, and 'led captivity captive', so Paradise was a place of holding, one that folks often mistakenly refer to as 'Abraham's bosom'. The reality is that in the story Jesus told about the poor beggar Lazarus who died, 'And the poor beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom', the 'bosom' there is literal. The angels took Lazarus to Abraham, in Paradise, and placed him in Abraham's lap. The Lord continues on to explain that eventually the rich man also died, and was in torment in Hades, he saw the beggar Lazarus afar off with 'Father Abraham'. He cried out 'Father Abraham, have mercy, send Lazarus to cool my tongue for I am in agony' and Abraham said that there was a great gulf between them that none could cross. Anyway, the rich man recognized both Lazarus, and Abraham. He called Abraham 'Father'. Even though their physical body was not there, they were recognizable as themselves. Incidentally, Jesus knew Lazarus by name, I don't believe that he ever used the rich man's name. God knows, and acknowledges those who are His. Anyway, despite not having a physical body, Abraham retained his gender, 'Father Abraham' the rich man called him. Are you following me so far?" Steve nodded, and said, "Yes, thank you, this is good." Paul resumed, "We are a spirit, we have a soul, and we merely live in these bodies. We are just as much 'us' out of our body as we are when we are in it. Some folks believe that God ordains what body every child will be born with. They base that on 'I knew you before I formed you in your mother's womb' but that was the Lord speaking specifically to Jeremiah, the Lord didn't say 'I form everyone in the womb'. If we consider folks who are born with deformities, or chronic illnesses, can we believe that to be a loving God's work? Deformities are a result of chance, and, or, environmental factors. Their flawed bodies do not define who they are as a human being. Steven Hawking is an example of an amazing human being, locked in a very flawed body. I will never believe that God made his body that way. Humanity possesses a great spectrum of physical, emotional, mental, and gender attributes. Transgender folks believe that while their body might have a physical 'sex', their gender, a facet of who they are inside that body, is a separate, more true, representation of their identity. And I agree. I will also say that I have an immense respect for transgender folks. They suffer great rejection, often from the ones who should love them the most. They also often suffer significant persecution. They endure great physical pain, attempting to bring their physical appearance in line with their identity. Its an imperfect process, and very painful, but it is their only hope of partially reconciling their body to their gender." "Thank you Pastor, even though I am not a brain like Amanda is, I followed that, and it makes sense, thank you." "You are very welcome Steve, please call me Paul." Steve thanked him again, excused himself

and left.

Paul started in on his cold breakfast, as so often happened, his explanation to Steve had also served to reinforce his resolve. It wasn't long before most of the folks had shown up for breakfast, he got up and moved to Serelynnne and Raevyn's table, sitting between them. While Raevyn's attention was occupied in conversation with Gunny, he leaned over and whispered in Serelynnne's ear. She smiled and nodded.

Serelynnne waited until the last of the folks who weren't keeping watch had gotten their breakfast and seated themselves. She rose saying "Paul has asked to address us all." she sat down. Paul took Rae's hand pulled her up from the bench, and out in front of all of the tables. He looked into her eyes, and said in a loud voice. "Father God, I thank You for Raevyn, for the beauty, and courage of her heart, for her quick mind, and the sharp tongue it wields. Lord in Your presence, and the presence of those here today, I take Raevyn Song to be my wife. I will love, honor, respect, and encourage her as long as I live. I am Yours, and hers, till death do us part." Tears streamed down Raevyn's face as she said, "God, I thank You, I could not ask for, nor find, a better man than Paul. Since, it seems, You will have me, and he will. I am Yours and his, till death do us part." Paul kissed her as everyone clapped and cheered.

As their lips parted, Paul saw Raevyn suddenly look sad, he whispered, "whats wrong?" She whispered, "We only brought about a 3 month supply of my hormone pills into this universe, sometimes I hate this body." Paul said, "You know, because I have told you, and shown you, many times, especially today, that I love you for who you are. I wouldn't change you for the world, except in so far as it made you happier with yourself." "If only I had been born in a woman's body, I wish I was Serelynnne's identical twin." As she said that, Paul wished it too, for her sake, with all his heart. He felt a surge of power flow from his abdomen along his arms and into Raevyn. Raevyn felt tremendous heat throughout her whole body, it increased, until she gasped, it was nearly unbearable. "Raevyn, you are glowing!" Serelynnne shouted. Raevyn looked at her hands on Paul's shoulders, they were indeed glowing with a golden honey shade of light. Everyone got up and rushed over and stood around her and Paul. After a few moments the light, and the sensation of heat, began to fade. Both were completely gone about a minute later.

"She regenerated!" Abby said. Gunny said, "Raevyn, except for the piercings, and hair color, you now look exactly like Serelynnne!" Paul said, "The prophecy." Raevyn said, "It said we were going to have kids, it was true! Paul, I have changed, my implants are gone, but I still have breasts. And my female bits down there feel totally different." Serelynnne said, "That was incredible!"

From behind them Jessica said out loud, "I wish I had bigger breasts, I wish I had bigger breasts. Darn, nothing's happening." Ellie said, "Maybe Paul has to be touching you for it to work." Paul said, "I am NOT touching anyone's breasts, well, anyone's besides Raevyn's that is." Everyone laughed.

Heidi said, "There is a mirror in the bedroom of the RV if you want to see yourself now Raevyn." "Yes, please!" After Heidi had led Raevyn Serelynnne, and Paul to the RV, and the mirror, Raevyn spent several minutes standing side by side with her sister. She finally turned and hugged Serelynnne saying "I'm going to have babies! And we are going to save this world!" Serelynnne said, "The prophecy!" Raevyn nodded, saying "Paul probably has it memorized, he is so much better at 'believing' than I am, well, than I was, I guess. If I can't believe now, after this, I'll never believe anything."

Serpthae stirred, awakened by a powerful pulse of magic, it had been hundreds of years, years spent in the oblivion of hibernation, since she had last felt magic at work on At'Lan'Ti'Ah! As she gradually rose toward full awareness, one thought dominated her consciousness, driving out even the painful screaming of her ancient joints, the Masters had returned!

Faer'Ah'Ten'Ah was standing before a mixed class comprised of about sixty percent elves, and forty percent dwarves. Giving his favorite lecture, "Some four hundred years ago, the 'Masters', as the Dragons named them, 'Terrans' as we know them, came to At'Lan'Ti'Ah. Their arrival of their Wa'Gun'Trane at the valley of Shang'Ri'Lah, as they named it, had brought them into the midst of a time of great darkness here on At'Lan'Ti'Ah. The forces of the Darklord had nearly overrun the last vestiges of our civilization. The Terrans, with their Win'Chest'Ters drove off the Darklord's forces, and delivered our ancestors. Together with them, our ancestors built Jer'Ih'Co'e Ae'Vi'Ar'y. For the Terrans had brought magic with them, a magic unique on At'Lan'Ti'Ah. While most creatures native to At'Lan'Ti'Ah were resistant to this magic, with dwarves being nearly impervious to it, the dragons, the dragons were most susceptible. It was said that, with but one word, some Terrans could heal a dragon of horrific battle damage. Others could shape rock, divert water, draw winds. Over time, as some of our people, both elves, and dwarves, developed friendships with the Terrans, they themselves began to be able to use this magic, though not at any strength comparable to that of the Terrans. Sadly, when the last of the Terrans died, the magic died with them. All that we have left of them now, are legends, and myths. Stories of how they bonded the great dragons, and drove the dark forces back to the cold inhospitable north-lands. Stories of how they brought us knowledge from their world. Taught us their language, how to make papyrus, and taught us how to make printing presses, so that we could preserve that knowledge. Alas the fire that destroyed the great library of At'Lan'Ti'Ah in our grandfather's grandfather's time also destroyed most of..."

He was interrupted by the arrival of two people, his dear friend Seamus Rockbrother, a dwarf, and Tim'Oh'Thi'Ah, Faer'Ah'Ten'Ah's assistant. "I am sorry to interrupt, but the Mistress requires Scholar Faer'Ah'Ten'Ah's presence. Scholar Tim'Oh'Thi'Ah will complete this lecture." Seamus's deep gravelly voice said.

As they made their way through the halls of his beloved Terran Academy of At'Lan'Ti'Ah, Faer'Ah'Ten'Ah, who had grown up, and lived his whole life here, nurtured in it's atmosphere of knowledge, and peace, wondered what crisis his grandmother deemed important enough to interrupt a lecture over. The Academy sat on some 60 acres South of En'Til'Zha, the capital city of At'Lan'Ti'Ah. The Academy lay 2 miles West of the forest of Ss'Uss'Dri'Ad, about 30 or so miles West of the valley of Shang'Ri'Lah.

As they arrived, Faer'Ah'Ten'Ah saw that Sage Bar'Tim'Ae'Ous, who had retired just this past year, was also with his grandmother Mag'De'Lenn. "Faer, Seamus, come in, close the door. Sage Bar'Tim'Ae'Ous, will you please explain what we need of them, and why." He nodded and said, "Scholar, Rockbrother, we need you to assemble a small team of trusted, woods savvy associates. The team should be no more than 10, no less than 5. You must travel inconspicuously, but also safely. Too many will stand out, too few would risk their safety. You must leave this evening, quietly, and make your way with all haste to the valley of Shang'Ri'Lah. Our oldest surviving prophecy says that it is possible, though not guaranteed, that the Terrans might return within twenty four hours of any conjunction of our three moons, there will be such a conjunction in two nights. Four such conjunctions have occurred in known history, the first brought the Terrans of old, who drove back the darkness. The second took place without result, at the third conjunction, the team we sent found evidence of a fight between a small group of Terrans and a large force of darkspawn. Of the Terrans, they found only bones. You must make haste, if Terrans do arrive, but do so before you are there to help protect them, they too may be lost. We have been losing ground to the darkness for decades now, we desperately need the Terrans, if we are to survive." "If they might need protection, should we not speak to Queen EfFlu'Via, and ask for an escort of bowmen?" "No grandson, it is too important that we send only those

that we know to be trustworthy. Since the death of good King Wen'Ces'los, the royal family has hardened themselves to us, some have even derided the legends of the Terrans. It is my fear that they have broken covenant with the legacy of the Terrans. In this, we can only trust fellow members of the Philosophers of Terra, and then only those who we are absolutely sure of. We do not know what spies the Queen might have among us. You might arrive to find the Terrans slain by Elven hand. I do not say Dwarven hand, dear Rockbrother, your people are stalwart."

Thus it was that Faer'Ah'Ten'Ah found himself, and Seamus, in the company of three wood elves, Ath'Th'Os, Por'Th'Os, and Ar'Am'Miss, paired with two dwarves, the brothers Fergal, and Fergus Smith, making their way into the forest. Riding the seven best horses that the academy owned, and leading a pair of heavy laden pack horses.

No sooner had they passed out of sight of the farm lands outside of the woods, than they found themselves confronted by Prince Rue'Pri'Ckt and two of his bowmen, also leading two pack horses. "Well, Faer, Seamus, I was quite surprised, and not a little discomfited to learn that you were going on a pilgrimage, and that you hadn't invited me." He said sneering, and lacing the word, "pilgrimage" with scorn. "Ah, Prince, the thought had not really occurred to us that ye might be wantin to come along, seein as how there ain't ta be any wenching, or drinkin to be found on our pilgrimage." Seamus drawled, then peered at one of the bowmen, "Although, ye could hae brung yer own wine, and mayhap that 'lad' could be a lass. Maybe ye plan on doing some drinking and wenching after all." He turned and looked levelly at the Prince. Both of the Prince's bowmen bristled, but they settled back into their saddles at a gesture from the Prince. The Prince responded, "Well, in any case, shall we be off, I am sure you do not wish to be late."

Faer was inwardly furious, Grandmother was right, he had already known that his boyhood friend had turned into a spoiled, vain, foppish, dandy, who surrounded himself with sycophants. He had not truly been willing to admit to himself that his friend had also turned away from the teachings of the light. That was now certain, Rue'Pri'Ckt had done everything within his power to delay, or divert, their progress. They were going to be very late getting to the valley of Shang'Ri'Lah.

He estimated that they were still half a day away from the valley at the rate they were traveling, the conjunction had occurred the night before last. He was contemplating ordering his party to leave the Prince's party behind, and to proceed with all speed to the valley, when they crested a hill and three Terrans stepped out from behind trees.

They were dressed in clothing such as he had never seen before, it was obviously tailored to blend in with the woods. They carried weapons similar to the drawings he had seen of the famed Win'Chest'Ters, but somehow more deadly looking. The one in the middle stepped forward and said, "Hello, I am Raevyn Song, this is my brother Galen, and our friend Gunny. A dragon sent us to find you."

Chapter Five

Serelynnne passed Vinnie, who was working at emptying the Walemart trailer. He was dropping the pallets near a doorway across the tunnel from the kitchens and dining halls. Mike Jella, and Steve Starke were unloading the pallets. For the moment they were just stacking the contents of the pallets alongside the hallway. Serelynnne was fine with that, they would decide what went in which storeroom once they had enough unloaded. Most of the rest of her people had taken the bus down and were filling it with packages that they were removing from the damaged forward FedEx trailer. The FedEx

packages would likely end up in the same series of storerooms.

She found Heidi and Frank in the kitchen, they were resting while a few volunteers worked on making lunch. "Why don't the two of you take a break, the RV is empty, and the girls are down helping unload the FedEx trailer, this is a good time for the two of you to have a little 'you' time." They shared a smile, thanked her and rushed off toward their RV in the tunnel. The folks nearby had heard the conversation, they exchanged smiles with each other, and with her.

Heidi lay next to Frank, sex with a thoughtful, dedicated man, was always good sex. She drifted off into a contented sleep. Almost immediately she fell into a dream, in her dream she was remembering her partner Morrie. Oy veh! Her old bones hurt, her wing membranes were brittle, and her eyes were cloudy. Step by step she dragged herself down the tunnel toward the door. The Masters had come! She needed to open the door for them.

As she stopped to rest for a moment, her mind drifted to her first memory of her partner Morrie. She remembered him as a young man, standing there with others as she forced her way out of the shell. She had known that she was his the moment that their eyes had met. He had such kind eyes, her Morrie. She remembered his voice in her head saying "*You shall be called Serpthae!*" She had exulted, she had a name! And a partner. She had felt his reaction, as he felt her joy, excitement, purpose, and wonder. Her thoughts returned to the present, it was so hard, she was in such pain, and the way to the door so far. But she started forward again. She was the last, all of the others had passed during their long, long sleep.

She must open the door, so that they could get in. They must go up to the Aviary, they needed to move the eggs onto the hatching bed. The darkness had fallen upon the world again, only they, partnered with her kind could stand against it. She must greet the Masters!

Heidi sprang awake, saying "What a dream! I dreamt that I was a Jewish Dragon!" She wondered if there had been something hallucinogenic in the food they had eaten for breakfast. The dream was so vivid. Frank sat up, and said, "I think I just had the same dream!" Heidi said, "Struggling in immense pain to get to a door and open it for the Masters?" Frank nodded, then said, "We need to tell Serelynn, and the others."

They quickly dressed, and rushed out of the RV to look for Serelynn. When they had found her, they had reiterated their dreams to her, identical, down even to the name of the dragon, "Serpthae." When they had finished, adding that they were sure that there was a dragon behind the "back door", Serelynn considered what they had told her. After a few moments, she said, "Well, this might make me look a fool, but the potential need outweighs the risk." She tapped her ear bud, "All work parties, this is not an emergency, but secure from your operations and return as soon as you safely can."

When they had all returned, Serelynn left Gunny and Ken to guard the now closing garage door. The rest of her folks she asked to meet her at the back door. When the last of them had arrived at the back door, Serelynn addressed them, had Heidi and Frank describe their dreams, and said, "I know that this is going to sound crazy, but we believe that there is a very, very, old, very, very, tired Dragon in a lot of pain on the other side of this door. Struggling to get to us." After giving folks a few moments to absorb it all she said, "Paul, front and center, hands on the door. Rae, Danny, and I will stand a pace behind him, with our hands on his back and shoulders, everyone form up in a wedge behind us, hands on backs and shoulders. Everyone: will strength, healing, freedom from pain, and love through the door to 'Serpthae'. She is a dragon, who is very old, stiff, faithful, courageous, and very precious. She needs our help, and we need hers." Paul felt a nearly unbearable flood of power passing through him, not only were his hands glowing, the area of the door around his hands was also glowing.

Serpthae felt wave after wave of magic entering her body, she was glowing! As her eyesight cleared, she could see individual brittle scales becoming supple and strong. Her bones, joints, and wing membranes, all had stopped complaining, she was completely pain free! She felt like a hatch-ling again! As she glowed, with what Morrie had named "the Shekinah", she danced!

With their ears, and in their minds, the people at the door heard a trumpeting roar of victory! They all stood back in awe! Minutes later they heard the door begin to creak open. After a long wait, it had opened enough for Serelynnne to slip through the crack. To her surprise, Heidi was right behind her, followed by Raevyn, and her brothers. Their hand lights revealed an iridescent purple scaled Dragon sitting about forty feet uphill of the door, just far enough back to let it fully open without hitting her.

As she looked down at them, her golden eyes met Serelynnne's. Serelynnne's mind 'blossomed' she could FEEL the Dragon's thoughts. Serelynnne said, "You are no longer Serpthae, for you are the mother of a nation, you shall be called Serptheah!" Serpthae, now Serptheah heard the voice, heard the words in her head, and trumpeted another roar of joy!

Valen turned to his brother and said, "And so it begins!" Heidi turned, looked at them, turned back to Raevyn, and said, "I've been meaning to ask, is your family dog named 'Zathras'?" Raevyn laughed, "No, 'Londo', but as you have obviously guessed, our parents, and we, are big Babylon 5 fans." she said. Heidi said, "Its all Kosh-er to me." Galen, or Valen, she wasn't sure which said, "We are all Kosh-er!" In her head Serelynnne heard, "*Babylon 5?*" she turned and looked up into Serptheah's eyes saying "A great parable in the form of 5 visual and audio novels, called television seasons. Once we are more settled in, I think the whole family will want to share the experience with you. My brothers, Galen, and Valen are named in honor of two of the characters in it. Kosh, Zathras, and Londo, are also characters." "*A Pun! Kosh/Kosher! I get it!*" Serelynnne wondered how much of her thoughts were being shared with Serptheah, or was Serptheah just THAT intelligent! "*Both!*" she heard in her head. Serelynnne smiled, "Just my luck, I get a Mensan dragon." Frank said, "We've got the test, did you want her to take it?" "*A test!?!?!?*" "Maybe tomorrow." Serelynnne said.

Soon all of the humans had passed the doorway and crowded around Serptheah, each with a hand on her, or hugging her legs, or tail. She could feel love flowing into her and her love flowing back out. "*And the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel.*" Serelynnne heard Serptheah say. She mentally sent the dragon a question mark. "*Something my Morrie used to say, just before we would go into battle.*" Serelynnne said, "'This very day I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds and the wild animals, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel.' Something from the Tenakh, what we call The Old Testament." Frank said, "First Samuel Chapter 17 Verse 46."

Raevyn said, "Can she breathe fire?" Serptheah chuckled, "*Of course I can! What kind of a dragon would I be if I could not breathe fire?*" "A non smoker?" Raevyn said. "You can hear her, Rae?!?!?" Serelynnne said. "Can't everyone?" "Not that I know of, I thought only I could. Serptheah, do you hear Raevyn's thoughts too?" "*Yes, though not as clearly as yours, her mind 'tastes' very similar.*" "Can you hear anyone else's thoughts?" "*Only the eggs.*" "The eggs?!?!?" "*Yes, they are waiting for you up in the Aviary. We need to move them onto the hatching bed.*" "How many eggs are there?" "*There are only 12 in my last brood. But there are 214 in total.*" "OK, we appear to be well on our way to another busy day. Is there anything else you can think of that I might need to know about?" "*Just the elves, and the dwarves. You already know about the darkspawn.*" "We call them Ogres." "*Yes, a fit match for what I see in your mind. The elves, and dwarves are our allies, they live in En'Til'Zha, a city to the West of here, about three days walk through the Ss'Uss'Dri'Ad forest.*"

Even though she knew that her sister had heard the dragon, Serelynnne said aloud, for the others sake, "Rae, take Galen, and Gunny, in full battle dress, about two days West through the forest is an

Elven and Dwarven city. They are supposed to be our allies. Run a series of solar powered repeaters mounted in trees for our Tac-Net. I want to be able to stay in touch. Plus if they are indeed allies, we will want a way to maintain communications with them." she smiled.

Raevyn and her team left, headed toward the vans, to gear up for their mission. Serelynn and most of the rest of her people followed Serptheah up the tunnel, after 200 yards, it widened onto a plateau overlooking what looked like a crater, roughly two miles wide, that abutted the tallest of the mountains in sight. The rest of the mountain rose thousands of feet higher. On the right side, a waterfall fell thousands of feet into a lake. Along the whole remaining face of the mountain there were perhaps a dozen ledges, each with a few dozen openings, each appeared to be large enough for Serptheah.

Serelynn repeated aloud as Serptheah described the Aviary to her: *"Those are the Aviary's dragon lairs, each lair also has a series of rooms for its partner. There are common rooms within them as well. The lair for the Dragonqueen, and the Queen dragon is at the very top, those are our quarters. There are two other sets of quarters on each side of ours. Along each side of the crater, including the side below us, are entrances into the dining halls, kitchens, store rooms, quarters for support staff, as well as barracks for the army."*

Serelynn looked down into the crater, she could see herds of animals grazing. *"We have cattle, oxen, bison, sheep, horses, goats, mammoths, chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, boar, as well as many kinds of fish in the lake. There are also orchards, and fields that were plowed and planted long ago. We have a great deal of food stored, as well as seeds. Most of which are in the storerooms down the right side road, we will take the road on the left."*

As Serptheah led them down she continued her description *"This road leads to the barracks, kitchens, dining halls, and store rooms. The facilities here can accommodate hundreds of Dragonheroes, their dragons, and hundreds of staff, that is in addition to the facilities you found at the garrison at the tunnel entrance. If you look below the crater wall, under the dragon lairs, you will see the rookery, and training facilities, for newly hatched dragons, until they learn to fly, they and their partners are quartered there. Beyond the lake, along the crater wall, are terraces, they are heated by pipes formed into the rock under them. We can regulate the temperature of the soil, and to some extent the air above them, this allows us to have crops nearly year round."*

Heidi asked, "Serptheah, how were the pipes formed?" *"They were sung into being by Rockbrothers. The first of whom were Terran, but soon there were many Dwarven Rockbrothers, and even a few Elven Rockbrothers. Rockbrothers can use magic to shape and form stone, iron, and other metals."*

Ken said, "I have been meaning to ask, how does 'magic' work, we have seen it in action twice now, that we know of. Once when Raevyn was transformed, and again when you were restored." *"Because you Terrans are the source of magic, and because it seems to be triggered by, and controlled by the will, Morrie came to believe that it was based on, or perhaps an expression of, the authority God gave to Adam and Eve. 'Be fruitful and multiply, replenish the Earth, and rule over it. Have dominion over the fish in the sea, over the fowl of the sky, and over every living creature that moves upon the Earth.' Morrie was certain that it was that 'rule', that dominion, controlled, and expressed by the will, that formed the essence of magic here. It is certain that when the last Terran died, the magic in this world died with her. It is also certain that it returned with your arrival. What is more, only elves and dwarfs who had been befriended, you might say apprenticed, by Terrans could use magic."*

They carried on, exploring the Aviary for another hour or so, then it being lunch time, the humans headed back down the tunnel for the dining hall. Serptheah went into the crater, which they had begun to call "the bowl", in search of a suitable sheep for her first meal in years.

After lunch, while most of the people resumed their exploration of the Aviary, several resumed the project of moving the FedEx trailer's contents to the bus.

Serelynn along with Valen, Danny, and Paul, met Serptheah, and followed her to where her eggs were being kept. They moved her 12 eggs, under her ever watchful eye, to a chamber which had several

stone walls, each around a foot tall, and 2 feet wide. Every few feet there were 'bowls' that had been carved into the roof of the wall, they were around a foot in diameter. She had them set the eggs along one wall. They could feel significant heat rising from the stone walls. *"It will take twelve to fourteen days for the eggs to begin hatching. They will not all hatch at the same time. I should be able to tell when one is about to hatch, which will allow for enough warning to gather your people. Not everyone can partner with a dragon, but it is rare, provided that there are at least a handful of prospective Dragonmasters at a hatching, for there not to be a partnering. If it does not happen at the hatching, it sometimes happens in the week that follows. If a dragon has not been partnered within the first week of hatching, it must be killed. A feral dragon is a very dangerous creature. Dragons will generally fly at some point after two weeks from their hatching. Sometimes sooner, that is why a potentially feral dragon must be killed quickly. It is also why having a larger group of potential partners is better."* Serptheah said as they left the hatching beds. Serelynnne couldn't help but feel that while her life had gotten a lot more exciting lately, it had also gotten quite a bit more complicated. She was going to have to delegate a lot more than she had been in the habit of doing.

As Serelynnne reached the plateau at the top of the tunnel, she received the message from Raevyn that her team had made contact, along with an unusual report, and a prudent request.

Chapter Six

Raevyn stepped forward and said, "Hello, I am Raevyn Song, this is my brother Galen, and our friend Gunny. A Dragon sent us to find you." Faer'Ah'Ten'Ah, and Seamus smiled. The Prince's bowmen drew their bows, the arrows pointed at the Terrans. Rue'Pri'Ckt growled in High Elvish "Kneel before your prince!" He then turned to Faer, and said, in High Elvish, "Translate that!" Faer turned toward Rue'Pri'Ckt and said, in Terran, "I will not translate that. You know their language as well as I do, you sat next to me as a child, learning the same lessons." Rue'Pri'Ckt said, in Terran, "I did not wish to soil my tongue." He turned to the Terrans saying "Kneel before your prince!" Galen laughed, he watched as one of the Elves who had drawn his bow, let an arrow fly at his chest. As the arrow flew toward his chest Galen thought "I, and my uniform, are 10 times harder than diamond, the arrow is as a feather." He glowed for a moment and the arrow bounced off of him, its steel arrowhead dented by the collision. Gunny saw the arrow fly, adjusted the aim of his Remington 1100, and fired. The shotgun was loaded with 12 Ga 3 inch slugs, his aim was true, the body of Elven bowman went down, it no longer had a heart.

When the Prince's bowman let fly, Seamus roared, pulling his sword from across his back, as he turned his horse toward the bowman. He watched in awe as the back of the bowman exploded. He turned and placed his sword at the neck of the remaining bowman. "That will be enough of that!" he heard Ra'e'vyn say. Raevyn looked at the Prince, who was growing very pale, he looked like he might sick up. "We are American citizens, we bow to no man. We recognize no one over us save God. Those who administer our land, are our elected servants.

For firing on a member of my party, 'Prince', your party now stands with its lives forfeit. You five," she gestured at Faer, Seamus, and their companions, "I am guessing that you are not in his party? You seemed fairly glad to see us, and your reaction sir," she nodded toward Seamus "would seem to indicate that you were outraged, and acted toward our defense." Seamus said, "Aye, tis so, we were sent to warn you that darkspawn prowl this forest, and that we might advise, and perchance aid in, your protection. That lot attached themselves to our party and delayed our arrival by more than a day." he growled. Raevyn smiled, Serelynnne was NOT going to believe this, a Dwarf that spoke with an Irish accent!

Faer moved his horse forward a few paces, "My name is Faer'Ah'Ten'Ah, but my friends call me 'Faer'." He pronounced it like "Fae-er". "That is my colleague Seamus Rockbrother, but 'Seamus' will do for friends." "Aye!" Seamus growled and nodded. Faer continued, "We are not a part of Prince

Rue'Pri'Ckt's party, however, we did allow he and his two henchmen to attach themselves to our party. The forest is dangerous to travel in small groups, it is safer for a combined group."

The Prince said, with a supercilious smile, "Perhaps it was precipitous of me to demand obeisance, after all, you did not know that this forest is part of my mother's realm, not a part of this 'America' you speak of. I am sure that once you become aware of reality, you will learn to bow." "We will bow, oh Prince, when you can compel us to do so by force majeure." Raevyn said.

The Prince looked puzzled. Galen spoke up "Don't worry 'Prince Prickt' it will never happen." Raevyn turned to Faer, "Would you and your party like to join us and the rest of our people back at our camp? My sister and brother are there, if they are in danger, I would like to get back to them." "We would be honored." Faer said.

The Prince spoke up, "We shall go as well, I must make a full report to my mother, the Queen." Raevyn stood there staring at him for several moments. When he had begun to fidget, she said, "Very well. But remember what happened to him." She nodded toward the dead bowman, "Your lives stand forfeit already, do not repeat your earlier folly."

As they all turned and worked their way back through the woods, Seamus moved his horse next to Faer's, "Is she not magnificent lad?" he said. Faer imitating his friend's accent, said, "Aye, that she is lad, as fine a specimen as 'er seen." Gunny, who had taken up position behind the group, and who had better hearing than most, smiled.

As they walked, Raevyn leaned toward her brother and whispered, "How did you do that?" Galen said, "Two words, Wolf Dream." "Thank God for Robert Jordan!" she said.

As they continued walking, she toggled her ear bud saying, "Serelynnne, we have made contact, one Elven casualty, he fired an arrow at Galen's chest, it bounced. Galen said that he used the concepts he learned in Robert Jordan's Wheel of Time series to 'imagine' that the arrow would not hurt him." Galen who had toggled his ear bud said, "I imagined that I and my clothes were ten times harder, and ten times stronger, than diamond, and that the arrow was as a feather."

To an uninformed observer, it would appear that brother and sister were having a conversation with each other. "We have four elves, as well as three dwarves, who are presumed allies. As well as two, no longer actively, hostile elves. It knocked the wind out of Prince Ruprickt's sails when Gunny blew a hole through the elf who shot the arrow at Galen. Education by shotgun, is very effective. I have invited the allies back to meet our sister and brother at our camp. The Prince insists upon joining us. I recommend buttoning up the tunnel, leaving the backhoe, and one of our vans outside with just you and Valen." "Agreed, that will limit their knowledge of us, until we know who we can trust."

Hours later, as Raevyn's group approached the Terran camp outside the door to Jer'Ih'Coe Ae'Vi'Ar'y, Prince Rue'Pri'Ckt, who had insisted on walking to her left, spoke up, "So you have not been able to gain access to the Ae'Vi'Ar'y, what a pity, it is quite impregnable, you know." Raevyn said, "Well just because we might not get into it today, that doesn't mean we might not be able to tomorrow."

As Serelynnne and Valen, in full battle dress, met them, she asked, "Who are your companions Raevyn?" Raevyn said, "Gentle beings, may I present my sister Serelynnne Song, and my brother, Valen Song. Here are our allies, Faer'Ah'Ten'Ah, call him 'Faer', Seamus Rockbrother, call him 'Seamus', Ath'Th'Os, Por'Th'Os, Ar'Uh'Miss." she gestured at their Elven companions. Then at their Dwarven companions, "Fergal, and Fergus Smith."

She turned to her left, and said coldly, "This is Prince Prickt, and his henchman Sni'ed'li. They are definitely NOT our allies, they are just here to observe, so that the Prince-ling can run back to mother and report. I think we've managed to cure him of demanding that you kneel before his exalted presence." Seamus said in a stage whisper, "Magnificent, if I did not already have the three wives

permitted by Dwarven law, I would begin courting her immediately." Gunny from behind them said, "Amen, brother, amen!" Seamus felt sorrow that his new friend Gunny had been separated from his three wives.

As the Sun set they all settled down around the fire. Serelynnne asked, "Would you like to join us for dinner, we have some venison from a deer that we shot yesterday." Faer and his group readily agreed, thanking them. The Prince sneered, saying "We have our own food." Galen chimed up, "And are you going to go fetch your own firewood?" "It is our wood, from the Queen's forest." the Prince replied. "But not your deer, from the Queen's forest?" Galen retorted. "Very well, we shall join you, I thank you for your hospitality." the Prince said to Serelynnne.

After a fairly uncontentious dinner, they all settled in to sleep for the night. "Gunny, you have first watch." "Aye ma'am." Seamus said, "I will join you lad, if it is all the same to you." "Please do!" They waked a ways out toward the canyon opening and sat with their back to the fire. "Ye, and yours, should know, lad, that Fergal overheard Prince Popinjay instructin his henchman to make out on the morrow back to the Queen. His instructions were to advise her to gather her Guard, attack our people at the Academy, slaughter them, then make their way here to slaughter you." "Did he now, how unneighborly of him." Gunny said, with a smile so cunning that it warmed Seamus 's heart, it did.

Gunny pulled something out of his upper pocket, tapped it twice, then said, "Put this in your ear Seamus." and lifted his hair to reveal that he had one like it in his own ear. As Seamus did that, Gunny double tapped his own ear bud, then said, "Team Alert, I have just linked Seamus Rockbrother into the Tac-Net. He has some information you need to hear Serelynnne, Raevyn, Valen, and Galen."

Seamus heard him speaking from the thing in his ear! Marvelous! "Go ahead Seamus." he heard Serelynnne say. Oh this was rich indeed. He repeated what he had told Gunny, and added, "Once yon Prince and his henchman are soundly asleep, I will leave to warn my people. I can move faster through the forest than the henchman. Perhaps that will give them enough time to scatter, and go into hiding." "Seamus, I do not want to arouse suspicion by making contact with Faer, can you stand in his stead, and negotiate with me on behalf of your people?" "Aye, I can." "Very good. It is important that you know, and that the Prince does not, that there are a total of twenty two of us, not just the five that you see. The others, along with our vehicles, supplies, and arms, are inside Jericho Aviary. As is my Dragonpartner, Serptheah. How many of your people are at risk?" "Several hundred in total, but only perhaps two or three hundred are in En'Til'Zha city." "As your ally, I invite your people to join us here at the Aviary, I offer them sanctuary, and a place at our side to fight the darkness, as it has been prophesied."

Gunny watched as tears streamed down the gruff Dwarf's face. "On behalf of all of my people, I accept, we will move here, elf, dwarf, kit, and kine." "Very well. Gunny, you and Seamus will move farther out to the edge of the canyon. Do so in stages, I will signal you with three clicks when it is time to leave. When you leave, go to the highway, your transportation will be waiting on the other side of the FedEx trailers.

About half an hour later, Gunny and Seamus rounded the rear FedEx trailer, Gunny smiled, Seamus said, "As I live and breathe!" Serptheah the dragon nodded her head and lifted a leg, they could see a harness attached, and one on the other leg, Gunny strapped Seamus in on the outside of one leg, then strapped himself in on the outside of the other.

He had no sooner patted Serptheah on her shoulder than she had lunged into the air. Her massive

wings unfurled and three flaps took them up above the trees. It took her just over half an hour to reach the end of the forest. She set them down in a field. "Thanks Lass, t'will take us naught but half an hour to reach our people." Seamus said as he and Gunny unstrapped.

Gunny checked that both his and Seamus's straps were re-secured so that they did not cause Serptheah any problems. Then gave Serptheah's neck a hug and stepped back. She leapt into the air and was soon gone from sight. Gunny attached a repeater for the Tac-Net to a nearby tree, aligning it's solar panel facing South.

Seamus led Gunny in the back of the Academy, through a seldom used door, that he happened to have a key for. He had found it most convenient, when he wanted to slip out, unobserved, to toss down a few brews with his friends. He then led Gunny up five flights of stairs, down the hall, to the Head Mistresses suite. With Gunny following, he slipped in the door.

Despite the hour, the Head Mistress was up, working at a desk by the fireplace. "Gunny, may I present Mag'De'Lenn Head Mistress of the Terran Academy of At'Lan'Ti'Ah. Mistress may I present Gunny, Ambassador from the Terran nation of America." "You made it to them in time!" she said. Seamus shook his head gravely, "We were quite late, you see, the Prince and two of his henchmen met us just inside the Ss'Uss'Dri'Ad forest. All insistent that we allow them to join us. T'were a plan to slow us down, so much so, that we were a day and a half late in reaching the Valley. We only arrived there this evening, after meeting Gunny and two other Terrans, Raevyn Song, and her brother Galen Song in the Ss'Uss'Dri'Ad. One of the Prince's henchmen shot an arrow at Galen's chest. The arrow bounced off of the lad, it did, right a'fore me eyes. Gunny here shot the henchman in the chest with yon enhanced Win'Chest'Ter, it is called a 'Sh'Ot'Gun'. The henchman had no heart after being shot, though, I'd wager he had no heart a'fore being shot. The Terrans put Rue'Pri'Ckt firmly in his place. He, and we, went to their camp, where we met Serelynn Song, and Valen Song, sister and brother to Raevyn and Galen. While we were there Fergal overheard the Prince order his remaining henchman to leave at dawn, to return to En'Til'Zha, and report to the Queen. His recommendation to her was to slaughter all of the folks here at the Academy in a surprise attack. Then to proceed to the Ae'Vi'Ar'y and slaughter the Terrans. There be seventeen Terrans in the Ae'Vi'Ar'y, four with the Prince, and Faer, Gunny here with me, makes twenty two total. The Prince knows not that there be more than five of them. They've got him believin that they are unable to gain access to the Ae'Vi'Ar'y. As lovely a dragon as ye've er seen flew us here, to just outside the Ss'Uss'Dri'Ad. Gunny will tell you of our allies offer." he stepped back.

All in all, a reasonably concise report, Gunny approved. "Ma'am, our leader Serelynn Song, has offered to take all of your people in. They will find refuge at the Aviary, and if they wish, an opportunity to join with us and fight against the darkness, as has been prophesied." He double tapped his ear bud and said, "Gunny to base." "Base here Serelynn replied." Gunny took an ear bud out of his pocket, double tapped it, and handed it to the Head Mistress. "Ma'am, if you would, put this in your ear, please." As she did, she heard Gunny say, both with her empty ear, and from the earpiece in the other ear, "Serelynn Song, I present to you Mag'De'Lenn, Head Mistress of the Terran Academy of At'Lan'Ti'Ah. Head Mistress, I present to you Serelynn Song, President of the United States of At'Lan'Ti'Ah." "It is a joy to meet you Serelynn, but we have limited time. On behalf of my people, I accept your generous offer. I will speak with you after I have started to get my people moving toward safety." "Agreed! Gunny, when you and Seamus are finished there, sometime before dawn, you will need to to return to that field for pickup." "Affirmative."

Gunny sat down and watched as the Head Mistress pulled several bell pulls. Within minutes she had dozens of bleary eyed messengers racing God knew where. He heartily approved.

Several hours later, Seamus returned. "I have sent messengers to those of our people, that I could think of, who are out of the city." "Then we should get back to that field for pickup." "Aye, yon Prince will be expecting us." "Gunny to base, we are going to need pickup in approximately half an hour." "It will be there."

Soon after they arrived Serptheah landed, they strapped in and she took off. After she had dropped

them behind the FedEx trailer, Serelynnne said, "Okay, we have just over an hour till dawn, wait down just inside the woods for the henchman. Capture him, alive if possible, and interrogate him. If he confesses, we will confront the Prince with him. If not, he will simply disappear. Eaten by bears perhaps." "Wilco." "What, or who, is a 'Will-co'?" Seamus asked. "It is short for 'Will comply.'" Gunny answered. "I can see now that our Terran vocabulary will be growing." Seamus said with a smile.

Just before Dawn, they heard three clicks on the Tac-Net. Roughly 5 minutes later, the henchman bounded into the woods. He made so much noise that they decided to wait to capture him until he had gotten well out of earshot of the Aviary entrance. Tracking someone that noisy was a trivial exercise, for either of them. They caught him with his pants down, literally. After he had wiped himself, they trussed him up using his own clothing. It took Gunny, and a heated knife, less than three minutes to convince him to confess. Which he did in full, in High Elvish, to Seamus. "Serelynnne, we have our confession." "Outstanding, bring him up, we will confront the Prince."

Prince Rue'Pri'Ckt smiled like a kid who had successfully stolen not only the cookies, but the jar itself. He was utterly pleased with himself. He had outsmarted these pretentious peons. That bitch, 'Raevyn', sat down across from him. "So, Prince, do you remember when I informed you that your life was forfeit. And warned you not to repeat your earlier 'precipitous' behavior?" He said nothing, just glared at her.

The other Terrans crowded around him, their weapons pointed at his head. "In point of fact, did you send your henchman, Sni'ed'li with a message to your Queen, suggesting that she attack the folks at the Terran Academy of At'Lan'Ti'Ah?" His face paled, "I did not." he said.

Raevyn gestured, and Gunny and Seamus led Sni'ed'li up to them. Seamus said in High Elvish, "Tell them what you told us." Sni'ed'li spoke for several minutes, Faer translated. He confessed, fully, even to many things that they had no particular interest in.

Raevyn raised her hand to cut them off. She stood, removing her Glock 18 from it's holster. "Prince Rue'Pri'Ckt, I sentence you to death." she said. She pointed the Glock at his head, and fired. Serelynnne drew her Glock 18, walked over to Sni'ed'li, and shot him in the head.

Serptheah landed in the canyon about 8 feet away from them as the elves and dwarves looked on in awe. Serelynnne made introductions, and then said, "Gunny, we need to dispose of those bodies, somewhere far enough away from here, that they will not immediately be associated with this place. Would you, and Seamus, strap back onto the outside of her legs and hold these two bodies until she has flown several miles South above the forest. Drop them in a section where the trees are thicker." Seamus smiled, "'T'would be me greatest pleasure!"

She smiled back at him, and turned toward Gunny, "President of the United States?" Gunny stood up straighter, looked her in the eye, and said, "I improvised. But, why shouldn't we give these fine folks the same freedoms, and rights, that we enjoyed?" "I will consider that, next week."

Serelynnne turned to their guests, "Now that you have met Serptheah, I would like to introduce you to the rest of our people. Danny, open the door please." She led the group toward the opening door in the rock face. She ushered their allies in, and led them on a quick tour, making introductions as they progressed.

As they toured the barracks complex closest to the front door, she said, "As your people begin arriving we will house them temporarily in these barracks. As each group settles in, we will make an effort to ascertain what their vocations are. I am guessing it will take several days for the last of your people to arrive."

Faer said, "They will likely stretch out as they proceed through the forest, each group at their own

pace. I am certain that many of our people will wish to take up arms, and follow you in the fight against the darkness." Serelynnne, after taking a few moments to consider, said, "We will form two 'squads' to begin with, one led by Raevyn, and the other by Gunny, they are the most highly combat trained of our people. We will assess the skills our volunteers possess, establish a training regimen, create an Organizational Chart for each squad, and populate them as we go along. In the mean time, as a temporary measure, please designate two of your people who are here now, they will work with our Facilities and Physical Resources Coordinators, Frank and Heidi. And another two who will work with Ken who is our Sentient Resources Coordinator. Those two groups will oversee our preparation for your people's arrival. Raevyn, I want to disburse our team, in pairs, along the beginning of the route that their folks will be traveling to get here. Act as Guardian Angels, patrol the route, eliminate any threats, remain unseen, if practical. I have asked Serptheah to drop your teams in convenient clearings, two at a time starting with you and Gunny on far point. Grab some breakfast and get your teams equipped and briefed before you leave, say 15 or 20 minutes from now." "Will do." "Faer, you, Seamus, and I, will meet with Serptheah, after she returns, we will discuss the past, the present, and the future of this world. In the meantime let's grab some breakfast."

Chapter Seven

After breakfast, Heidi led Serelynnne up the tunnel, she told her, "While you were entertaining our guests yesterday, several of us took on the task of cleaning, and preparing some quarters in the Aviary. We started at the top level, which holds yours and Serptheah's quarters, along with five sets of dragon/human quarters on either side of them. We used leaf blowers, buckets, mops, and wet vacs from the Walemart truck. We also cleaned the level below it, which had 14 sets of quarters. We can house all of our people up there. We found, and cleaned, kitchens and dining halls on the second level down. There are several full storerooms on that level, as well. We found waterwheel driven chain lifts, the iron platforms are large enough to fit two pallets on them. I suggest that we move up there starting with you and Serptheah, followed by your family. If we do that this morning, we can move the rest of us up through the course of the day. I suggest that we keep the elves and dwarves down here for the time being, they will need to help settle their folks in as each group arrives." Serelynnne said, "That should work, I want to move both vans to the base of that section of the crater wall. We will store the items on their pallets in the quarters between mine and Serptheah's and those that we assign to Raevyn. Once the vans are emptied, we will use them to begin moving the contents from the Walemart truck out of the storage room hallway, up to that set of quarters as well. When we have more time, I want to unbolt the gun safes from the vans, each is attached to the van's frame by eight, inch thick bolts. And they weigh hundreds of pounds, empty. But I want to keep our weapons secure, and at hand. We will put one in my quarters, and the other in Raevyn's. We should also take one of the generators from each van, each has two. They are designed to run on diesel, bio-diesel, or vegetable oil. The oil from the storerooms should work just fine. We will want to place one on each level that you have cleared. The 100ft extension cables, and surge strips, from the Walemart truck will serve to distribute power. I want one of the 90 inch UHD flat screens in the inner parlor of Serptheah's lair. We will hold meetings there. We should also equip one of the dining halls with one. Vinnie, Ken, and Mike Jella should be able to get that done. Mike was planning on becoming an Electrical Engineer, Ken knows quite a bit about electronics, and was a Ham radio geek."

Serelynnne, Faer, Seamus, and Serptheah were seated comfortably in the Queen dragon's lair. The lair had three large rooms, carved into the mountain, the deepest room was where Serptheah slept. It

connected to a private parlor, large enough to accommodate 4 or 5 dragons, which was where they were all currently sitting. The private parlor had a human sized doorway that connected it with the Dragonqueen's quarters. Which were now Serelynne's quarters, her quarters had a series of seven human sized rooms, they would not suffer a lack of space. Serptheah's private parlor also connected to a public parlor, capable of accommodating perhaps as many as a dozen dragons, which was open on one side to a ledge. The ledge was large enough to accommodate three full sized dragons with their wings spread. When Serptheah had flown them up here, she had landed there. Presumably, the ledge needed to be that large to facilitate landing under adverse weather conditions.

The private parlor was quite comfortable, like all of these rooms, it was partially climate controlled. A pair of large wheeled valves allowed adjustment of the flow of either cold mountain water, or warm thermal spring water, through two separate series of interconnected, "pipes". Which, Serptheah had explained, had been "sung" into the rock floors and walls by Rockbrothers. Serelynne decided that that was as good a starting point as any for their discussion.

She took her tablet out, set it on a small table in front of them, and started it's voice recording app. "Serptheah, can you explain the various manifestations of magical abilities known to you? I will repeat what she says so we can all converse." *"As you may recall, I explained that Morrie was convinced that magic, on Atlantia, was a manifestation of the authority given to Adam and Eve, and thus to all of their Terran descendents. Those elves, and dwarves who became friends, or close associates, of Terrans also were known to share in their Magical abilities. Morrie thought of them as apprentices, for each had shared in the specific abilities which their Terran friend had possessed. All of the abilities 'worked' through an expression of will, usually a verbal expression. Singing was the most common form of that expression, though some folks needed only a word. It was very rare, but some needed merely to will something. Most Terrans had abilities that fell into one category, one 'role', if you will. Rockbrothers, or Rocksisters, possessed the ability to manipulate rock, soil, metals, and manifested related abilities, such as being able to 'perceive' what was under the ground. They could locate minerals, or underground water. Terran, and Dwarven, Rockbrothers, most often performed larger, broader works. While the Elven Rockbrothers, most often produced smaller, more delicate works, such as jewelry, or fine tools. Lifeshepherds had abilities that allowed them to nurture plants and animals. They could 'perceive' a creatures state of health, or of disease, and could heal, repair, or accelerate and enhance growth. What they loved, and tended, plant, or animal, thrived. Worldmages could manipulate the world around them, within certain constraints. They could, for example, make their clothes extremely strong, and an arrow as insubstantial as a feather."* Everyone laughed. She continued, *"Mindspeakers could communicate Terran to Terran, Terran to elf, or Terran to dwarf, much as we do as Dragonpartners. This brings us to the 'roles' of those who are dragon partnered. The Dragonqueen, or Dragonking, is partner to the Queen dragon, she, or he, leads. They are, by covenant, the penultimate ruler of Atlantia. They, through their dragon partner are able to command in battle, for all dragons can hear the Queen, and they are partnered to the Queen. In our case, we have much to look forward to in the blossoming of our partnership. Normally, a dragon is partnered at its hatching, it and its partner grow in their partnership. By the time that the dragon reaches adulthood, they have usually reached a level of communication that, when they will it, bypasses words. Their thoughts merge. When they are in battle, when they will it, they fight as one. Dragonmages are unique, they possess all known 'lesser' abilities. They can perform any 'role' to some extent. Their abilities may not be the equal for example of a Rockbrother. Yet they can manipulate rock, and minerals. Dragonmages especially excel in healing. They are most often 'true believers', none have been agnostic, or atheists. Which Morrie also took to be an indication that these magical roles, and abilities, were manifestations of the authority given by God to Adam and Eve. Dragonjudges can compel the truth, they can always tell if someone is lying, or telling the truth. Because of this, their judgments are law. At their word someone can be jailed, fined, or killed, they often order restitution for wrongs done. Dragonleaders, or Dragoncapitans, are those who lead squadrons of dragons in battle. The Dragonqueen, and her Queen*

dragon, are too valuable to risk in actual fighting. A Dragonleader performs the exact role that Raevyn does in your group. She leads the team, on the ground. A Dragonleader, would lead the squadrons in the air, while the overall battle is overseen by the Dragonqueen, much as you have done so as the commander of your current team. A Dragoncapitan leads a single squadron. These are the known roles and abilities, perhaps you have brought us new abilities, or, even, new roles. It will be exciting to watch your people discover their abilities, and settle into their roles!"

Serelynnne tapped her tablet to turn its screen back on, then saved the recording that she had been making of herself repeating what Serptheah said. She started another recording, and asked, "Faer, could you describe what you know of magic?" "What few books that the Academy has preserved since the fire in the great library, tell us much of what Serptheah related. We did not know, however, that Dragonmages possessed all of the abilities. Though it was recorded that they often seemed to have a greater faith than other Dragonheroes. We knew that magic returned to this world with the arrival of the first group of Terrans. Their caravan of wagons was led by Peter O'Flarity, who was a Rockbrother, many of the dwarves of that time became apprentice Rockbrothers, and apprentice Rocksisters." "That would explain Seamus's accent." Serelynnne smiled. "Aye, lass, t'wer from him that we learned proper Terran." "I am curious, you all keep referring to them as 'Terrans', why?" "That was how they referred to themselves." Faer said. Serelynnne asked, "Did they not call themselves 'Humans', as we do?" A look of awe came upon Faer's face. "You are 'Humans'?! " "Yes, we are." "The oldest of our books, copied by hand from generation to generation, tell of the race that first brought dragons to our world. That race was called 'Humans', they were lost to us in the great plague that heralded the rise of the Darklord. They left behind little more than their name, legends, myths, and the dragons." "We have no dragons on my world. It would appear that those Humans, the Terrans, and my people came from three distinct parallel worlds." "*The Terrans also had no dragons on their world.*" Serptheah said. Serelynnne said, "I think that we have covered enough of the past for today, lets talk about the present. This complex, along with that in the tunnel, should comfortably house all of our people, in the near term we will have ample food, and safety. We should use the coming weeks to get to know each other, to weigh how best to mingle our people, culture, and technical abilities. Once we have become more integrated, we will want to plan, train, and prepare to stand against the darkness." They all agreed. It was further agreed that as their people arrived, study groups would be designated to exchange more detailed information. And that once the last of the Academy's folks had arrived, brainstorming sessions would be held. Their goals would be the technological enhancement of the elves and dwarves, as well as the adaptation of available energy sources to power the human's tools and devices.

As Serptheah lifted from the small clearing, that had formed at a bend in a stream, Gunny and Raevyn faded into the trees. As they worked their way along the stream, Gunny thought about Paul and Rae's wedding. Paul was certainly a good match for Rae. She, and Serelynnne, were two of the most decisive leaders he had experienced. Having spent time with the whole Song family, and having experienced a few of their "Zombie Apocalypse Bug Out" drills, he had to conclude that they had inherited it from their dad. Sebastian Song was a bit more temperate in his reactions, but they were if anything, more decisive than those of his daughters. It was already apparent that, without stifling her, Paul was a moderating, but encouraging, influence on Raevyn. Gunny heartily approved, which was why it bothered him that Paul had not had a set of wedding rings to exchange with Raevyn. Paul had purchased them, but they were left behind in a universe that none of them would ever see again. What he needed to do was find some gold. Maybe he could trade with the elves or dwarves for some. Or, he looked at the stream, maybe, once things settled down a bit, they could look for nuggets in a stream. He thought wedding rings would be the perfect wedding gift. Okay, that was odd, Gunny could swear that

he had just smelled gold. How could he smell gold? He stopped and turned back. Raevyn looked at him questioningly, he shrugged and shook his head a little, raised and lowered his eyebrows, and stepped back. There, that was the smell, it was coming from the stream. He waded in, looking at his feet, there! He reached down and pulled out a rock about the size of a golf ball. It looked like a golden peanut cluster, lumpy, with varying shades of gold, and fairly heavy. He stepped back out of the stream and over to Raevyn, whispering, "I could smell it. I am sure it is gold." She took the offered nugget, examined it. And said, "I'm no expert, but it looks like gold, and weighs a lot. It looks like a peanut cluster, if you smell any chocolate, let me know." She handed back the nugget, and they resumed their patrol. As they walked, Gunny couldn't get the theme from the "Goldfinger" movie out of his head. He was rolling the nugget in his left hand with his fingers. He wondered how much of it was pure gold, and how much was just worthless rock. Well, if it was gold, and he got it refined, maybe there would be enough for two wedding rings. He felt the nugget shed flakes into his hand, looked down, and saw that the nugget had become a sphere, roughly the size of a king size marble. Maybe 80% of the diameter of a golf ball. He shook the flakes of rock out of his hand, and looked at the gold sphere, it was glowing slightly. He tried to imagine how thick the rings would be, if he had the nugget formed into a ring for Paul, and a ring for Raevyn. As he imagined the size of their fingers, and the size of the potential rings, the gold melted, though he felt no heat, and formed into two rings. Of what he was certain, was the proper size. He smiled, and, slipping them into a pocket, thought "Gunny Rockbrother."

Chapter Eight

Mae'Tru'Doe watched as yet another group of elves and dwarves passed her family's farm, and entered the woods. Similar groups had been passing by all day long. She had seen them every time she had crossed the yard doing chores. She had recognized at least one or two individuals in every group. Most of the groups were led by scholars from the Terran Academy, others by Academy administrators. She and her sister had both attended the Academy, in fact she herself had graduated just last month.

The current group included old Scholar Gay'Bree'Ell. She knew him well, he had been one of her favorite instructors. She set aside the basket of corn that she was holding, crossed to the gate in the fence, and rushed to his side. As she walked along with him, she asked, "Learned Sir, can you please tell me what is happening?" He motioned her to lean her head closer, and said in a soft, conspiratorial, voice, "We are on a pilgrimage, my dear, all of us. The whole Academy, as you can see," he gestured at the many horse drawn carts laden with tools, clothing, and especially books, "on THIS pilgrimage we are taking all of our possessions. They are even bringing the entire Academy Library." "This can not be just a pilgrimage then." "Oh, I could not say, we swore you see, were we asked, to say only that we were going on a pilgrimage. I would dare say, you and your family, are long overdue for a pilgrimage, yes indeed, a pilgrimage would do your whole family nothing but good." he said with a wink. She thanked him, and rushed back to the farm.

She found her father in the barn, tending to a horse that had a loose shoe. She explained to her father what she had observed all day long. Repeated her conversation with the old Scholar. And added, "Father, we must gather our most precious possessions, and join them, whatever is causing the Academy to evacuate, surely threatens us." "I have seen several of the groups, and indeed have been pondering what it might portend. If the whole Academy is being evacuated, it must be for a most dire reason. There is nothing but forest between here and the mountains of mists, except for the valley of Shang'Gri'Lah. They must be going to the valley! Go, tell your mother and sister to gather the most precious of our possessions, only enough to fill one cart, mind, along with food for our family, enough for a 4 or 5 day journey. I will get the horses hitched to both of our carts. I shall also fill the bottom half of each cart with my tools, the forge, anvil, mill stone, and feed for the horses. I shall also load as much of the seed we have stored as will reasonably fit. It could be our most important possession, if we must start our farm afresh.

Once you have told your mother, run to your aunt and uncle's farm, warn them, tell them we are going, and that I said that they must too. Do not argue with them, you know how they love to argue, there is no time. So, give them the message, and get back here as quickly as you can. We shall be ready to leave by the time you have returned."

When Mae returned, she indeed found her family waiting. Their horses were hitched to two brimming carts. They had also filled eight large sacks, which were tied together in pairs. Her father, mother, and sister had already draped theirs over one shoulder. Her father handed her one of the scythes he was carrying, after she had shouldered her own pair of sacks.

As they started walking toward the woods her father asked, "How did it go with your aunt and uncle?" "At first they asked questions, but I explained that I had told them all that I knew. Then they wanted to argue. I explained that I must go, that my family was waiting. As I turned and ran, uncle yelled that they would follow as soon as they were able." "Good, my brother is stubborn, but he is not stupid." her mother said.

Mae and her family, had been traveling through the woods for an hour or so, she in the lead, her father guarding their back. Four of the Queen's guard, with swords drawn, stepped out from behind trees, blocking her family's path. "What have we here, you are a long way from your farm, farmer. Or, perhaps, looter, yes I think these must be looters, carrying off some poor elf's farm." one of the guards said. He spoke in Terran, most elves, and dwarves, spoke Terran, only the Elven nobility spoke High Elvish.

Mae replied, "We are not looters, we are free elves, let us pass." Grasping her scythe more tightly, she stepped between the guards and her family. "Look fellows, she means to cut us down, as if we were but straw. And four of us, and the one of her, what good sport!" one of the guards said. The guards took a step forward, raising their swords. Her father started forward from the rear of their group.

Before he was able to reach her side, two creatures, dressed in green and brown patterned clothing, stepped silently out from behind the trees on either side of her. They stood to either side, slightly ahead of her. Their faces were painted in dark green and black smudges. Mae thought, "Their face paint, and clothing, are designed to make them blend in with the woods."

She wondered if there was purpose for the dark purple hair sticking, out from under the creature on her right's helmet. The creature said, "She is not alone, this family, and these woods, are under my protection. You will drop your weapons, leave them here, and depart from these woods, or you will die."

Mae's father said, in awe, "Terrans! The Terrans have returned, no wonder the Academy makes pilgrimage! The Dragonheroes have returned!" The guards charged, and fell, the Terrans had waved their Win'Chester's at the guards, and unlike the Win'Chester's that she had learned about at the Academy, these fired many Bull'Let's very quickly.

Mae watched as the other Terran, he had such bright red hair under his helmet, walked over to the guards. He pointed what looked like a Co'Alt'Four'Tee'Five at each guard, and shot them in the head, one by one. The purple haired Terran looked toward her mother, father, and sister, saying, "I am Raevyn Song, this is Gunny, your family should be safe from here on. Several of my people are patrolling the forest, ensuring that no one interferes with your exodus."

She turned toward Mae smiling, and said, "You showed great courage facing down four elves with one scythe. What is your name?" "'Mae'Tru'Doe', Honored One, my family and friends call me 'Mae'." Raevyn laid her hand on the girl's shoulder, "Would you fight as courageously for Atlantia, Mae'Tru'Doe?" "I would Honored One." she replied, bowing. "Very well, when you get to the Valley, tell them that Raevyn said to take you, and your family to the Aviary. They are to bring you to Ken, he is to assign you to my squad. If anyone refuses, tell them that I said that 'you have the heart of a dragon'. Remember, 'heart of a dragon'."

Mae nodded, speechless, and watched as 'Raevyn', and 'Gunny' slipped back into the woods and were soon out of sight. Her family, after taking a few moments to collect themselves, and to collect

four swords, resumed their trek, now much better armed.

After leaving the elven family, Raevyn and Gunny returned to a portion of the forest where they had noticed a small cliff-face and other rock outcroppings. With their backs to the cliff-face, they sat and had a lunch consisting of power bars, and Gatorade. Gunny looked at one small outcropping of rock, focused, and imagined a lawn gnome. Moments later, the glowing rock had formed into a 3 foot tall, replica of a lawn gnome. Raevyn deadpanned, "Well done Gunny! We will never lack for lawn gnomes!" He laughed, and gave the rock gnome her face. "No fair!" He gave it Prince Rupric's face. "Oh, now you've done it, that will scare all the elven children who pass this way." He restored its generic 'lawn gnome' face. "This is good practice, I wonder if I could do the same with the whole cliff-face." "It is impressive, and worthwhile, but I still wish that you could turn rock into chocolate."

With sunset an hour or so away, Serelynnne felt it to be a good time to check on the status of the Academy's exodus. "Mag'De'Lenn, how are things going with your folks?" "I and the last group are all that are left, however, there is a complication, a rather large group of the Queen's Guard is marching toward the Academy, we may not be able to leave." Serelynnne sent a mental call to Serptheah to meet her at the top of the tunnel. "Can you barricade yourselves in? And how many of you are left?" "There are 8 of us left, and yes, we should be able to barricade the chapel doors from inside." "I am on my way to get you. I should be there in 20 minutes or so. Can you hold that long?" "We should be able to, it should take them some time to search the outer campus, working their way inward." Serelynnne considered those of her personnel who were not deployed to the forest. "Ken, I need you to grab two M16s, as many spare clips as you can, and meet me at the front door asap. We are going to rescue the Head Mistress and her group. They were to be the last group to leave the Academy, however, they are trapped by a large number of the Queen's Guard." she said.

She rushed up to Serptheah, climbed onto her back, strapped her legs into the forward saddle, and attached a tethered harness to her upper body. Serptheah launched into the air with a roar, flew up over the mountain side and down into the canyon.

As Serptheah landed, Ken ran out the door wearing two belts with Glock 18s on them, and carrying two M16s. He was followed by Seamus who's arms were loaded with 4 duffles which she assumed were full of magazines for the M16s. Seamus also had an M16 strapped across his back. Serelynnne smiled, "Welcome to the party Seamus." Ken handed Serelynnne an M16, one of the belts with a Glock, and some spare clips in pouches. Seamus handed her a duffel with spare magazines in it. Then both quickly strapped in, and secured their weapons and ammo.

Serptheah launched into the air her great wings driving her up and forward. Moments later she was over the forest, flying so fast that it was producing a rather uncomfortable wind chill. Serelynnne would have to look into arranging for a proper uniform for the dragon crews. As the miles were eaten by Serptheah's rage fueled pace, they suffered without complaint.

When they cleared the forest, she could see the Queen's Guard ahead, spreading out as they worked their way farther into the Academy grounds. She inquired of Serptheah if it was possible for her to land on a roof that looked down at most of the approaching guards. Serptheah answered by doing so.

Serelynnne stood high in the saddle, and shouted down at the guards. "You are not welcome here, leave at once, and you will be allowed to live." One of the guards, in a fancier uniform than the rest, called back, "We are here on the Queen's business, by what right do you interfere?" As words came into her mind from Serptheah, Serelynnne spoke them aloud, "As Dragonqueen of Atlantia, by right of the

covenant of Jericho, and in the name of the fallen Dragonheroes of old, I command you to sheath your weapons, and return to your Queen. Tell her that the Dragonheroes have returned, and Atlantia is under our dominion once again." Serptheah punctuated her last sentence by sweeping a stream of flame over the heads of the guards.

The fancily dressed guard turned to a messenger standing next to him, who blew a three note sequence on a bugle. "That be the command to fall back, making an orderly retreat." Seamus said, and added with a smile, "An' I din even get to fire this lovely weapon!" Serelynnne smiled back, "Maybe next time." She double tapped her ear bud, "Mag'De'Lenn, the Queen's Guard is retreating, your group can come out now." "Thank you, we will have the barricade cleared in a few minutes, then we will make our way to the front of the administration building, our horses and carts are there." "I see them, they appear to have been left alone by the guards. We will meet you there."

Serptheah set them down, keeping the corner of the administration building between herself, and the horses, so as not to frighten them. They unstrapped, rounded the corner, and headed toward the horses and carts.

As they arrived, Mag'De'Lenn, surrounded by three elves, carrying swords, and four dwarves, with drawn bows, came out of the building. Mag'De'Lenn's group met them, and introductions were made. Mag'De'Lenn explained that her companions were the most able students of fencing, and of archery, that the Academy possessed. She further explained that she had sent out all of the Academy's administrators, and department heads, one to lead each group, and that 'these fine lads' had volunteered to protect her. "We had imagined that we might need to fend off a few Ogres, not half of the Queen's Guard!" "Mag'De'Lenn, if your group can make it to the valley on their own, I would like you to accompany us. We can get you to Jericho in less than an hour, it would aid in getting your people settled in, if we had you there to coordinate. We can take one other with us, if you would like." "I will go with you, but they will be safer if they stay together." "Understood, if you will walk with me."

When they were all strapped in, with Mag'De'Lenn in one of the two rear facing saddles behind Serelynnne's, Serptheah launched into the air, as gently as she could. They paced the group of elves and dwarves, flying high enough that they did not spook their horses.

Once the elves and dwarves had entered the woods, Serptheah proceeded at a leisurely pace back to the Aviary. Half an hour later, their honored passenger was standing on the plateau overlooking the crater. She hugged Serelynnne, "In the name of my people, and of our world, welcome." Serelynnne hugged back, thinking about the contrast between this lady and her people, and the Queen's people. Not just the contrast in their reception, but in their attitudes, in their hearts. Mag'De'Lenn, Faer'Ah'Ten'Ah, and the irrepressible Seamus, good people, all. Now her people, all.

Chapter Nine

After a celebratory dinner, Serelynnne saw to Mag's need for working quarters. She was assigned a whole barracks. She could use it's commander's rooms for her personal use, and it's main room for a combination study and conference room. As she passed the Pond's RV, Ellie who was just opening it's door, waved to her. She smiled and waved back. Despite the past few days, the Pond girls were obviously taking things in stride, a tribute to their upbringing, and, probably, the benefit of imaginations expanded by growing up with Fantasy, and Sci-fi books, TV series, and movies. In fact, the few of her people who had struggled, at their arrival here, were probably those who were the least exposed to Fantasy and Sci-fi. Given that there was a lot of "unknown" out beyond these rock walls, maybe they should start a nightly Sci-Fi movie, or TV series marathon.

Abby was laying in the RV's couch, reading Sharon Lee's 'Carousel Seas', on the 8.3 inch tablet that Valen had let her borrow. The book was quite good. She had just finished chapter 3, when Ellie opened the RV door and came in carrying the tablet that Galen had given her. Ellie had told her that she was reading Wen Spencer's 'Wood Sprites'. Abby had enjoyed 'Wood Sprites', she chuckled remembering how much havoc the two 8 year old protagonists had wrecked. She said hi to Ellie, and slid her legs off of the couch to make room for her. As Ellie settled in to the opposite corner of the couch, Abby looked back down to her tablet. "You have a message from Valen" popped up in the notification list. She tapped it, and read, "Hey, how is the book?" She replied that she was really enjoying it, and asked him how he was enjoying patrolling the woods. He replied that it wasn't too bad, there weren't too many bugs, and it was warm enough, even if they couldn't have a fire. Ellie laughed, and when Abby looked at her, said, "Galen just sent me a message." For the next half hour or so, both sisters sat there, their companionable silence broken only by the soft sound of their fingers tapping the screens of their tablets.

Galen thought to his brother, who was several miles away, *"Lending them tablets with the secure messaging app was a great idea."* *"Thanks, texting with Abby sure beats sitting here watching the trees grow."* *"How long do you think we should wait before we ask them to marry us?"* *"I think we need to give this world a little more time to 'sink in' for our people. After they have realized just how isolated we are, and how much we will need to 'expand' the human presence here, all 'age' concerns will evaporate."* *"I bet you a pint of Ben & Jerry's New York Super Fudge Chunk that Danny Chin proposes to Sere within the next week."* *"No bet, after Paul's unorthodox, but amazingly sincere, wedding ceremony, and before the miracle, Danny looked like a dog worrying a mental bone."* *"Add to that that he is stuck out here with nothing to do but think. We are going to have two brother's in law before a week goes by."*

Danny Chin was deep in thought, but not so deep as to fail to notice that Valen was chuckling every so often. It must have been something he had read on his tablet. Danny was rehearsing marriage proposals in his mind. He wanted it to be perfect, Sere deserved nothing less. And Paul's wedding bombshell had certainly raised the bar...

Paul rested with his back against a tree, he could feel the life flowing in the tree behind him. He could also smell iron, the smell was coming from an outcropping of rock about 20 yards away. He could also hear an incoherent "buzz" of thought coming from Galen. Thank God that he couldn't understand those thoughts, and that he could, with a slight effort, block his awareness of their existence. Life on Atlantia was getting more interesting by the day....

Jessica, and Lauren, were resting in the woods approximately 4 miles away from the valley. They were the final pair of patrollers that Serptheah had dropped into the forest. It was roughly 3 hours after

sunset. Lauren became aware of 4 creatures approaching their position from the South West. They felt, wrong, diseased, very, very diseased. So diseased, that it nearly made her nauseous. “Jessica, I can sense 4 creatures approaching us from the South West.” “I can too, they feel 'wrong', I'd bet that they are Ogres.” “I am thinking that this means we are both 'Lifemages', which given our profession, isn't hard to accept.” “Yes, and sensing the enemy, that is very handy.” “Lets set up a crossfire using those two outcroppings for cover.” “Okay.”

About 6 or 7 minutes later they heard movement in the brush ahead of them. 2 minutes after that, the first of the four Ogres emerged. Once all four were visible, Jessica began firing. Lauren joined her, in moments all four Ogres were down. “Cover me while I dispatch them.” Jessica said, while changing magazines. She waited while Lauren swapped hers, then moved forward, and began slitting throats, with the KA-Bar knife that Raevyn had issued her. While she was doing so, Lauren updated Serelynn and Raevyn on their status, including their newly discovered abilities.

Serelynn had been expecting further contact with the Ogres, that it had taken this long, might, possibly, be an indication that their presence in the forest was a very sparse one. To date, her people had had more contact with the Queen's Guard than with the Ogres. That might change, as more and more Ogre 'patrols' failed to return, someone would surely notice.

Meanwhile, her people were beginning to discover their Atlantian “roles”. Jessica, and Lauren, Lifemages, Gunny Rockmage, Valen, and Galen, Worldmages. She, herself, had begun to be able to sense where her people were. She assumed that meant that she was a Lifemage, but she was keeping an open mind. Serptheah had said that they might have roles other than those of the past Dragoheroes. Life on this world was far from boring.

She was looking forward to a few days of rest for all of her people, once all of them were safely within the Aviary. She was contemplating declaring a two day holiday starting the day after they had all arrived. What to call it...“*Jubilee*.” Serptheah spoke in her mind. “Good idea! Jubilee it will be!”

By the time that the first of her people from the Academy began arriving, two days later, all of the Humans in the Aviary had moved up to their new quarters. The Ponds were the last, they had overseen the project of moving not only the individuals, and their possessions, but also the contents of both FedEx trailers, and the Walemart truck. Both pallets from the back of the Song family vans had been moved up to the quarters between Serelynn's and Raevyn's. And the gun safes had been emptied, removed from the vans, installed into Serelynn's and Raevyn's quarters and restocked. Generators were providing both occupied levels of the Aviary with power. And an additional one was providing the garrison in the tunnel with power. Serelynn was very satisfied with their progress.

They had also discovered more of her folk's roles. As things now stood they had 10 Lifemages: Herself, Raevyn, Jessica, Lauren, Frank, Heidi, Ken, Amanda, Mike, and Faer. 7 Rockbrothers: Gunny, Steve, Marcus, Danny Valdez, Vinnie, Seamus, Fergal, and Fergus. 3 Worldmages: Galen, Valen, and Miki. No one was yet sure what Paul was, though Serptheah said that she believed he might be a Dragonmage, possessing all of the abilities.

Mag'De'Lenn assigned her arriving people to the barracks that were closest to the tunnel entrance.

Once that barracks became nearly full, she would assign a new barracks to the groups that currently had the most members present. Then, as more of each of those groups arrived, they would go to that group's specific barracks. Others would go to the generic barracks. As a group housed in the generic barracks became large enough, it too was given its own barracks. In this way, in a short time, her people were sorted, and settled.

That night at dinner Seamus leaned over and spoke to Fergus, “Lad, I've a chore for you. I need you to be leaving on the morrow, make safe haste to the Dwarvenhalls. When ye get there, find Clan Elder MacRauch, tell him what ye seen and what ye heerd these past few days. Ask him to get you an audience with the Assembly of Elders, and King Rumpelstein. Tell them what ye seen, and what ye heered. Tell them that I ask, and advise, that as many as wills, migrate here, with their families, to join with us in the fightin' ta come. After ye meet with Elder MacRauch, and before the audience, find my wife, and tell her what ye seen, and what ye heered, and that I said she is to pack up the whole family and make her way here. Ye should also tell our close kin likewise. Collect as many of yer cousins as are willing to come here, and escort our families here. Keep them safe. “Fergus said, “Aye Uncle, an I guess I should spend some of me time visitin' the taverns, spreading tales o' the glory to be found in the company of the Dragonheroes.” “Aye, lad, we wouldn't want ye to make the return journey back here weak on account of ye not being properly fortified before ye start back.” The two dwarves exchanged a conspirational smile and nod.

The next morning, Fergus sat on an outcropping at the end of the box canyon, waiting for the Sun to rise. As it rose, he put the ear-buds attached to his 3.5" tablet in his ears, opened Winamp, and selected shuffle play. He set off on his journey listening to Mr Blue Sky, how he loved E.L.O.!

Two days later, the last of the folks coming from the Academy had arrived. Serelynnne had ordered Raevyn and Gunny to wait until the escort that had been prepared for Mag'De'Lenn reached them. Then join that group and proceed back to the Aviary. As their final group caught up to the other patrols, the patrols would join them. In this way, they “rolled up' the patrols, and arrived within minutes of the arrival of final group of Academy academics. That night, at a series of celebratory dinners, Serelynnne officially welcomed them, and announced the start of the two day “Jubilee” holiday.

Danny Chin sat across the table from Mag'De'Lenn at dinner, she was proving to be in possession of a very agile mind. He was explaining the Human's judicial system to her. She confided that before she had become headmistress, she had been a scholar of law. Hours went by as they discussed the US Constitution, the rule of law, and the Covenant of Atlantia. The elf at her right, Bal'Ta'Zar, who was the head scholar of law at the academy, was a somewhat less enjoyable dinner companion. He said most of the right words, but Danny could swear most of them were lies, or partial truths. Bal'Ta'Zar paid lip service to the covenant, but he did not believe in it. In fact he resented it. Danny was amazed at how very certain he was of these things.

Mag'De'Lenn was very angry, Bal'Ta'Zar was lying, his insincerity was a stench in her nostrils. How could she have not recognized that he detested the Covenant before now. She turned to him and said "You are lying. You detest the covenant, and the concepts of the US Constitution appall you." Bal'Ta'Zar denied it, his every word of denial a lie that rang in her mind.

The elf's lies rang like a bell in Danny's mind, he looked the elf in the eye and said, "Why do you detest the Covenant so?" Bal'Ta'Zar fidgeted, in moments it was clear that he was in severe distress. Mag'De'Lenn said, "Why!" The truth exploded out of Bal'Ta'Zar's mouth, "Because I serve the Darklord!" He covered his mouth with his hands and scrambled to get off of the bench. Seamus, who was sitting next to him, tackled him and pinned him down. Faer who was sitting next to Danny, and who had been following their conversation, pointed at Danny, and said, "Dragonjudge!" He then pointed at his grandmother, "and Headmistress Mag'De'Lenn is a Judge of At'Lan'Ti'Ah!"

In another dining hall, Gunny slipped the wedding rings into Paul's hand, and smiled, saying, "Your wedding present." Paul looked at his hand in awe, "Where, how?" Gunny replied, "Its good to be a Rockbrother." Paul tapped Raevyn on the shoulder, and when she turned toward him, he took her left hand, and slipped the smaller of the rings on it, it fit perfectly. He looked back at Gunny and smiled.

Raevyn took the larger ring from Paul's hand, and slipped it on his ringer. It fit perfectly. Paul said, "Our wedding present from Gunny Rockbrother," and smiled. When she hugged Paul, her eyes met Gunny's, they were filled with pride, and tears. Gunny heartily approved.

Frank, Heidi, Abby, Ellie, and Danny Valdez were sitting with Galen, and Valen. When dinner was over, Valen and Galen said, in unison, "Mr and Mrs Pond, we would like your permission to court your daughters", then singularly, Valen added, "Abby", and Galen added "Ellie." Frank looked at his daughters, hoping for some kind of cue as to what he should say. They were both smiling like they had won the Powerball. Well this would be an easy answer. He quickly looked toward Heidi, it never hurt to be sure you were on the same page as your Wife. She had an even bigger smile on than when they had won the Powerball. "Sons," he said, "You have not only our permission, but our blessing!" "Station!" Valen thought at Galen. "*Slow and honorable for the win!*" Galen thought back. The only one not smiling at that table was Danny Valdez, but the others were so taken up by the moment that no one had noticed.

Three mornings later, after two days filled with celebration, not a little feasting, and a lot of getting to know one another, Ken, Steve, and Marcus, led a group of elves and dwarves into the lecture hall. As the elves and dwarves seated themselves, Marcus pulled a tarp off of the printing press that he and Steve had modified. The elves and dwarves had been using "Plate" style presses, they used wooden plates into which a reverse image of the page that was to be printed had been carved.

This press, used a movable type system. Pages were printed using "plates" that were assembled from rectangular bronze "blocks" with letters on them. The blocks were cast using molds, they had

made hundreds of each letter. The press also allowed for the use of images carved into wooden blocks. Though it was also possible to make molds from the wooden blocks, and then cast several bronze blocks of the images, should the book, or pamphlet being printed, be one that was expected to be printed thousands of times.

As Marcus, and Steve, demonstrated, starting at assembling a plate of movable type blocks, and progressing to printing the actual pages, Ken described the process. As they finished their presentation, Ken explained that they were going to be forming a new "guild", its members would be called, "Techno Sages". Their purpose was to study, and preserve, technology, to implement it wisely, in an artistic way.

Had they known who Leonardo Da Vinci had been, he would have presented him as the "Techno Sage" poster boy. Their presentation, the new design of the press, and their "Techno Sage" guild, were all well received. Every person attending wanted to join the guild. Those printers attending, wanted their own movable type press, and the others, had all expressed their desire that the technology of their own professions be similarly improved.

Chapter Ten

Mae was sharing a nearly empty barracks with three other elves, and two dwarves. Her family had been assigned quarters on the lowest level, and her dad was chairing the committee which had been tasked with restoring the fields that had lain fallow for hundreds of years. They were facing something closer to a forest, than fields. A lot of trees were going to have to be felled, and their stumps removed, to restore the once pristine fields. He kept remarking that they wouldn't lack for firewood. Her mother and sister were working in the Aviary's kitchens. They were all settled in comfortably.

Mae was enjoying learning. Raevyn, and Gunny, referred to it as "Basic Training", there was a lot of physical training, but for a farm girl, used to doing chores all day, it wasn't so bad. Though a few of her barrack mates complained now and then. Mae had always loved learning, and she found that both of her teachers were founts of knowledge, even more so than the scholars at the Academy had been.

One of her favorite parts of the cadets' training was "Martial Arts" which were being taught by Paul Stephens and Miki Coyora. After Raevyn, and Serelynn, the woman she most wanted to be like was Miki. She was so self assured, and capable.

Mae especially enjoyed Gunny's anecdotes from his time in the "Marines". He had made so many of the same mistakes that she and her barrack mates had been making! His relating his own mistakes, and explanations of how he had overcome them, taught the cadets far more than the rote instruction methods that so many of her teachers at the Academy had employed.

As Mae sat in the front of the "classroom" watching Gunny teach, she was having difficulty concentrating, she could smell the rock floors, and walls, the water beneath the rock floors, and a hint of something metallic deeper than the water. It dawned on her, she was a Rocksister! She let out a happy "Yes!". Gunny stopped speaking, and raised an eyebrow at her. "Gunny! I am a Rocksister!" she blurted. "Outstanding. Front and center Cadet Tru'Doe."

When she had complied, and was standing in the front of the class, facing him, he put his hands into his pockets, then pulled the right one out. "What do I have in my hand, Mae?" She could smell something metallic, but it was a different metal than she could smell beneath the floor. She had a "sense" that it was gold. "Um, Gold?" she asked. Gunny opened his hand, and it had two small balls of gold in it. "Very good. And this hand?" He held out his left hand. She sensed that it was not metal, but rock. "Rock?" He opened his hand to reveal two balls of rock.

Gunny handed her the two balls of rock, "Imagine the balls becoming one larger ball." She did, and slowly, they began to glow, and then merged into one ball. She could do it, and she had not had to sing, or hum. "Very good Cadet Tru'Doe. Class is over for the day. Mae, you are with me, we will go report this outstanding development!"

The next day, she and her barrack mates were sitting in the same classroom, learning about “stealth and concealment” when Gunny's instruction was interrupted yet again. Raevyn, came in and waited for Gunny to notice her, and stop talking. “Gunny, I am sorry to interrupt, but Mae, and I, are needed down at the tunnel garrison.” “No problem, Cadet Tru'Doe you are dismissed.”

As Raevyn lead Mae down the tunnel, she explained, “Mag'De'Lenn reports that we have two very contentious elves down at the lower garrison. They claim to be your Aunt and Uncle. And are making a considerable nuisance of themselves. She has asked us, and Danny Chin, to attend a hearing regarding what to do with them.”

As they reached the lower section of the tunnel, Serelynnne met them, and led them to Mag'De'Lenn's conference room. Mae saw that her Aunt and Uncle were there, surrounded by several armed young dwarves. Also present were Mag'De'Lenn, Danny Chin, and her parents.

As she followed Serelynnne, and Raevyn to the front of the room, she stood next to her parents. Mag'De'Lenn stood and addressed the room, “We have several matters of policy to determine here today. Farmer Dry'Del and his wife, assert that they were offered sanctuary here, by their niece, Mae'Tru'Doe,” Mag'De'Lenn nodded toward Mae. “They further contend, nay demand, that they be allowed the same 'privilege' that Mae's family enjoys, namely to be quartered in the upper Aviary.” This hearing shall endeavor to establish the settlement status of those who are not among the membership of the Academy. It shall further address the claims made by farmer Dry'Del and his wife. Danny Chin and I shall conduct this inquiry.”

She nodded to Danny and sat. Danny strode to her side, and looked farmer Dry'Del in the eyes, “Farmer, why do you want to be situated in the upper Aviary?” “It will allow us to earn more as spies.” “And who is it that you are spying for?” “Queen EfFlu'Via.” Danny looked at the farmer's wife, “And are you spying for the Queen as well?” “I am.” Mag'De'Lenn asked her, “You have arrived several days later than your sister, her husband, and their children. Why is that?” “We waited to see if the Queen's Guard had managed to arrest them. When it became known that the Guard had not only failed, but had been killed, we decided that we should migrate to the Aviary. We did not want to be implicated in the deaths of the Guards.” “Why did you betray your family?” Danny asked. “We wanted their farm, it is better than ours, it's fields are more productive, and their farmhouse is larger.”

Mae stepped forward, “Was it you? Were you the ones who turned farmer Van'Dyk in to the Queen's Guards?” Her Uncle and Aunt just glared at her. Danny, looking at her Uncle, repeated her question. “Yes, it was.” her uncle answered. Mae said, in a voice filled with grief, “The Queen's Chancellor had him impaled, because he bartered for medicine for his youngest child. He said that, by bartering, he had robbed the Queen of her taxes. I have no Uncle, I have no Aunt.” She turned her back on them.

Mag'De'Lenn conferred with Danny, Serelynnne, and Raevyn. She then stood, saying, “In the matter of what rights of admittance those who are not of the Academy shall enjoy, it is determined that a hearing, similar to this one shall be held for each applicant. They shall be gently questioned, and if a majority of those holding the hearing are in agreement, they shall be permitted sanctuary here.” She turned to Serelynnne, who stood and said, “In the matter of farmer Dry'Del and his wife, you are found guilty of breaking the Covenant of Jericho. By it's laws you are sentenced to death. If the family of farmer Van'Dyk can be found, your possessions will become theirs in compensation for their loss at your betrayal.” Serelynnne sat. Mag'De'Lenn rose, “The prisoners are to be beheaded outside the walls of Jericho, two hours after sunrise tomorrow. This hearing is concluded.”

“Take the rest of the day off, your family needs you.” Raevyn told Mae as she gave her a hug. Serelynnne walked up to Mae's mother, and hugged her, saying, “I am so sorry, if there is anything your family needs, please just let us know.” She turned to Mae's father, “If you think it will help, take a day or two off, all of you. If you need someone to talk to, I, or Raevyn, or Paul, or Danny, any of us, are available to you. Baring an emergency, and even then, if it is possible, we will make at least one of us available. You are not alone.”

Heidi and Frank, came up, having been the ones first confronted with the issue, they had quickly brought it to Mag'De'Lenn's attention, and had remained, to see it concluded. "We are here as well, in case you are reluctant to burden the others." Frank said. Heidi nodded, and said, "In fact, why don't you all spend the next day or so as our guests. We can get to know each other better, and we brought some really interesting entertainment with us, when we came to this world. It is great for taking your mind off of other things. That along with some good food, and comfortable company, will ease your loss." Frank said, "We have suffered a few losses of our own over the years, we have found that a combination of good company, fine distraction, and listening ears, works wonders."

Mae's mother agreed, and her father nodded, following his wife's lead. After everyone had said goodbye, Heidi, and Frank, led her, and her family out of the conference room, and up to the Pond's quarters.

The next morning, given the likelihood that additional Academy personnel, who had not been in En'Til'Zha at the time of the exodus would make the trek to the Aviary, Serelynn ordered a few light patrols. The patrols, consisting of one human, an elf, and a dwarf, were to cover the forest adjacent to En'Til'Zha. The patrols would be useful for forming additional working relationships. She sent out three groups, led by Raevyn, Paul, and Danny. Danny had Ar'Uh'Miss, and Seamus's cousin Sean Tallman with him. Paul had Por'Th'Os, and Fergus. Raevyn had Mae, and Sean's twin sister Lyta. As had become usual, Serptheah had dropped the groups, in two trips, into the clearing she had originally dropped Raevyn and Gunny in.

As their groups disbursed, they almost immediately encountered heavy patrols of the Queen's Guard. Raevyn's group observed a band of eight of the Queen's Guard capture and harass a group of three elves, and one dwarf. Two of the Guard were armed with crossbows, and three had bows across their backs. She whispered, "Remember your training, if they start to fire crossbows, or arrows, fall to the ground, your M16s will work just as well down there." She stepped into the clearing where the Guard had intercepted the scholars, and said, "Release them, drop your weapons, and leave this forest." One of the elves with a crossbow started to raise it, she hit him with a three round burst to the chest. She and her people fell to the ground, and began servicing targets. Moments later only the scholars, and her patrol were alive. The scholars, being studious, had noted that her group had fallen prone, and copied them. As she approached them, the oldest member of their group, the dwarf, stood and bowed. "Greetings, honored one, I am Michael McCartney, and these are my companions, Sa'Man'Tha, Gre'Gor'Ree, and Bob. Bob's parents named him Car'Tage'Eah, but he insists upon Bob, he does." Raevyn introduced her companions. And their merged group worked their way deeper into the woods.

As they walked, Michael explained that there had been many reports of Queen's Guardsmen intercepting, and harassing groups, that were attempting to pass through En'Til'Zha, on their way to the Ss'Uss'Dri'Ad forest, and then on to the Aviary. Raevyn contacted Serelynn, and updated her over the Tac-Net. Over the next half hour, similar, reports came in from all of the patrols.

Serelynn assembled her "War Cabinet", which given the personnel on site, consisted of Serptheah, Mag, Faer, Seamus, Gunny, Galen, Valen, Ken, Frank, and Heidi. They were all seated in the Serptheah's private parlor, arranged in a semi circle with Serelynn, and Serptheah, in the center. In front of them were three eight foot tables laid out in a shallow "U". The 90 inch UHD flat screen on the wall in front of them displayed an areal map of the area. The map had been created, a week ago, from a series of digital pictures taken with the 32 megapixel camera in Serelynn's mil-spec tablet. It showed

the area from their valley to just beyond the city of En'Til'Zha.

"Our patrols report increased scouting by the Queen's Guard in the edges of the Ss'Uss'Dri'Ad adjacent to En'Til'Zha, they have begun taking any of our people that they encounter into custody. They are also getting reports of patrols West of En'Til'Zha, which have been harassing those trying to pass through to enter the Ss'Uss'Dri'Ad. I was hoping to have more time to train our people before we had another confrontation with the Queen's Guard. We simply lack the trained personnel to patrol the forest as well as West of the city." Serelynnne said.

"Additionally, every bullet that we use on a Guard, is one less bullet, and one less Guard, for the coming fight, against the Ogres. There has been decreased Ogre activity of late, that probably just means that they are building up forces to attack." Gunny said. Faer said, "It could be months before we have sufficient numbers of troops trained with your weapons, and tactics, to even begin considering moving against the Queen. Hundreds of our people could be captured, and likely executed, in that time."

Serelynnne said, "Valen, Galen, can you protect Gunny in the same way that you can yourselves?" "We have been practicing that, and yes, they can." Gunny answered for them. They nodded. Serelynnne said "Okay, I want to send an embassy to the Queen. It will consist of Galen, Valen, and Gunny. Seamus, and Fergal will provide security, and backup. Gunny will be in command.

Serptheah will take you, she will land inside the courtyard of the Queen's palace. You three will demand to see the Queen on my behalf. When they take you to her, confront her. Gunny, be firm, very firm, demand the release of our people, and that she stop harassing anyone wishing to come here. In addition to protecting you and themselves against attack, Valen, and Galen, will provide additional offensive weight of fire, if necessary. Seamus, you and Fergal, will stay outside with Serptheah, guard their way out, they may well be making a retreat under fire. You will all wear full battle dress, and take a full weapons load out, with more strapped to Serptheah's harnesses. If you don't have it, you can't use it, if you don't need it, you won't lose it. Gunny, If the Queen refuses, or at the first sign of hostile action, we will be at war, kill her, and as many of her nobles and Guards as you can. Do so, without putting your party at too much risk, Seamus, and Fergal will not have the same protection. If at all possible, spare the servants."

Chapter Eleven

An hour later, Serptheah landed in the courtyard of the Queen's palace, strode over to the entrance and stood. Gunny, Valen, Galen, Seamus, and Fergal all unstrapped and dropped to the cobblestones. Moments later, Queen's Guards poured out of the palace, and surrounded them. "Take me to your Queen" Gunny's voice boomed. "Seamus Rockbrother, and Fergal Rockbrother will remain here." As Gunny, Valen, and Galen, were "escorted" into the palace, one of the Guard attempted to prod Seamus to follow them. Seamus raised an eyebrow and hummed, the Guard watched in awe as the steel head of his halberd melted, fell, and puddled on the cobble stones. "A true Rockbrother!" the Guard next to him said. The Guards following Gunny, Valen, and Galen, entered the palace. The four remaining Guards backed away from Seamus and Fergal, in awe. Seamus snorted, and ordered Fergal to stand guard where he was. Seamus himself moved around Serptheah to stand guard on the side of her facing out into the courtyard.

As Gunny, Galen, and Valen were led into the throne room by the Queen's Chamberlain Ser'Vil'Lan, Queen Ef'Flu'Via rushed to get to her throne, and sat glaring at them as they leisurely proceeded to stand about ten feet in front of her. Valen, standing by Gunny's right side, turned and scanned from Gunny's right back toward the exit. Galen stood by his left and scanned from the left, across their front. Gunny said, in his booming drill instructors voice, "I have a command from Serelynnne, ruler of At'Lan'Ti'Ah, for you Ef'Flu'Via. You are commanded to immediately release all of

her people that you are holding. You will order the cessation of your patrols through the Ss'Uss'Dri'Ad forest. And you will, from this moment forward, allow everyone freedom of passage. The harassment of those seeking to migrate to Jericho will cease immediately. I will have your acknowledgment of these orders, and then we shall depart."

The Queen stood in rage, "How dare you! How dare you speak to me in such a tone. You may tell your 'Serelynnne' that Queen EfFlu'Via refuses her 'commands' and denies her 'authority'! Leave me, now, before I order your execution!"

Seamus was maintaining 'situational awareness' as Gunny had taught them, such wonderful new words, and concepts, that the Humans had brought with them. He noticed several of the Queen's Guard rushing across the battlement nearest them. They pulled a tarp from a siege style crossbow, it was pointing in their direction. He stepped between it and yelled, "Fergal, 'ware treachery!". As the Guards aligned the crossbow Seamus raised his shield and sang "Blossom, and grow wide, grow wide, and wider still." Even before they had released the bolt, its head had begun to blossom, as the crossbow released it, the iron bolt was opening like a flower basking in the Sun. As the widening bolt streamed toward him, Seamus, still singing, braced himself, and his shield. The bolt's, ever expanding, iron 'petals' slowed it down considerably. They also spread the force of its impact over a much wider area. When the bolt hit, it still crushed Seamus's shield, broke his arm, in two places, and slammed him into Serptheah's side.

Serptheah, who had watched as it happened, flamed the Guards and crossbow on the battlement. Turned, roared, and commenced flaming every Guard in sight. Fergal rushed around her to Seamus, and cradled the unconscious dwarf in his arms, weeping.

Gunny Rockbrother heard the roar, and spoke the one word signal that had agreed upon, "turkey". Gunny concentrated, the Queen's throne, and marble platform, melted. When Queen EfFlu'Via had sunk into the marble to her shoulders, Gunny solidified the marble. He removed his Glock 18, strode up to her, and shot her in the forehead. As soon as Gunny had given the signal, Galen and Valen had begun shooting. Starting with the 'Nobility', followed by any of the Guard present. By mutual consent, they spared the servants, and any unarmed peasants present.

The gunfire pulled Fergal away from his mourning, he lowered Seamus against Serptheah's side. He rushed to the large iron doors leading into the palace, and sang 'Dust, dust ye be, dust I make ye.' The doors crumbled, and settled into two piles of dust, one at each side of the doorway. He could see another pair of doors down a long hallway, those appeared to be iron as well. He was about to sing at them, when Gunny, Valen, and Galen came through them, and strode down the hallway. When they arrived, he led them to Seamus.

Gunny examined Seamus, he was alive, unconscious, and did not appear to have a concussion, but God only knew if he had internal injuries. After Galen and Valen had rolled the crossbow bolt aside, Gunny gingerly removed Seamus's arm from the shield. Galen thought to Valen, "*If only we had managed to get 'traveling' to work.*" "*If we can't open a wormhole, maybe we can teleport.*" Valen thought back. They each put a hand on Seamus, as they said in unison, "Step back. Serptheah, tell Serelynnne to get the EMTs to the Ambulance, please." They focused on the tunnel floor behind the Ambulance, and their minds 'slipped' into a state of resonance with each other. They willed that they and Seamus "BE" there. And they were. "Station!" they cried. Serelynnne, who was coming up the ramp

in front of Jessica, and Lauren, said to them. "Bill, Ted, what is wrong? OH! Seamus!"

She rushed up to them. Jessica and Lauren ran past them, opened the back of the Ambulance, pulled out the gurney, and gently laid Seamus on it. As they went to work, Serelynnne said, "Status!" "Would you like to see for yourself?" "Yes." Valen put a hand on her shoulder, closed his eyes, and nothing happened. Her brothers exchanged a look, then they each placed a hand on her shoulder, and then suddenly she was standing next to Serptheah. *"It appears that it requires both of us."* Valen thought at Galen. *"I wonder if it works with one of us and another Worldmage."* Galen thought back. *"I wonder if there is a limit to how much mass we can teleport."* Valen thought back. They eyed Serptheah.

Serptheah's head turned to them, and her eyes glowed with amusement, they wondered if she could hear their thoughts. Her great head nodded, and the amusement in her eyes grew. *"It is too bad that we can't hear her."* they both thought simultaneously. She nodded again. *"Um, Serptheah, have you told Serelynnne, or Raevyn, that you can hear us. Or that we can hear each other?"* Valen thought. She shook her head no.

Serelynnne returned from examining the throne room and asked her dragon, "Why are you laughing? Yes, well, it does look more like a flower than a crossbow bolt. Valen, Galen, she asked me to tell you that the flower resembles one of your 'fine' practical jokes." *"She didn't tell because she was enjoying the jokes!"* Galen thought, and Serptheah nodded to them. *"Dragons are so cool."* Valen replied. *"I can't wait till we get our own."* Galen responded.

As the great purple dragon lifted from the cobblestones of the courtyard, quickly made its way out over the forest, and receded from sight, Princess Men'Stru'Ah and Princess Fal'Lo'Piah walked up to their dead mother. They, and those who followed them, saw that she was embedded, up to her shoulders, in the marble floor. Men'Stru'Ah who was the oldest, turned toward Captain Ty'Len'Awl, who was now the ranking member of the Queen's Guard, and therefore its commander. "Have our troops assembled immediately, we shall march on Jer'Ih'Co'e Ae'Vi'Ar'y and destroy them!" Ty'Len'Awl exchanged a look with Lieutenant Ad'Vi'Il, his second in command. Was their whole family mad? "Yes we MUST avenge our beloved mother." Princess Fal'Lo'Piah added. Apparently they were indeed all mad, probably from inbreeding. "Are you insane!" Ty'Len'Awl said, "Three of them, just THREE, did all of this. Can you imagine what dozens of them, safely behind the walls of the Ae'Vi'Ar'y, could do to a besieging force? Our people would be slaughtered." Men'Stru'Ah coldly said, "How dare you speak to us so, Fal'Lo'Piah, and I, are of the blood! And I am now your Queen!" Ty'Len'Awl looked to Ad'Vi'Il, and nodded. They drew their swords, and struck. As Men'Stru'Ah and Fal'Lo'Piah lay there headless, in pooling blood, Ty'Len'Awl turned to Ad'Vi'Il, and said, "That is one headache we are well rid of! We must restore order here in the Capital. Then we must send a request for parley with the Dragonqueen, this insane conflict must end. All their," he gestured toward the dead Queen, and Princesses, "foolish struggle against the Dragonheroes has done, has been to further weaken us all, doing the darkness's own work for it."

Serptheah landed on the plateau, Serelynnne, Gunny, and Fergal, rushed down the tunnel to check

on Seamus. Valen thought at his brother, and Serptheah, "*Serptheah, after we check on Seamus, would you like to help test our ability to teleport?*" She nodded. Valen and Galen each gave Serptheah a hug and started down to see how Seamus was doing.

They soon learned that Seamus, other than a very broken arm, was otherwise undamaged. His arm had been set, but it had been decided to wait for him to regain consciousness before risking a Lifemage attempting to heal the breaks. Which would be an "iffy" proposition given dwarves reputed resistance to magic.

Galen and Valen returned to Serptheah. They climbed up and seated themselves, Galen in the front facing saddle, and Valen to his left in the saddle behind him. "*Where should we try for?*" Galen thought. "*The courtyard in front of the Academy administration building.*" Valen thought back. "OK!" They each placed a hand on Serptheah, and a moment later the three of them were in the courtyard looking up at the Academy administration building. "Awesome!" the twins said aloud. Serptheah bugled her agreement. "That was, at least, 30 miles." Galen said. They teleported back to the plateau, and Valen and Galen went looking for Abby and Ellie. What good was having a new ability, if you couldn't show it off for your lady?

Naomi Song was signing books, under her nom deplume, "Sally Nyghtengayle", at Meghan's Book Menagerie in Hyden, Kansas, when her smart-phone began playing "The Majestic Tale (Of A Madman In A Box)." Prior to entering the store, she had turned the phone to vibrate. The "ring-tone" was coming from the secure messenger app that the Department of Homeland Security's Civilization Sustainability Division had mandated that everyone on their family's "team" posses. The family had chosen several "ring-tones", this one signified that a non-catastrophic event had occurred. However, she would not be receiving a message via that app, if it was not a serious situation.

She excused herself, removed her smart-phone from her purse, as she stepped away from the book signing table, and turned her back, she opened the app, and read "Priority Zed, unknown temporal/inter-spatial anomaly occurred Rt 70, Kansas Turnpike half an hour ago. GPS tracking on 'T4RDIS', and, 'TARD1S' ends at time/site of anomaly. Cha'trez, our kids are not in Kansas anymore. Driver on Rt70 reported incident by cellphone, also reported lethal collision with hairy creatures, see attached pictures, and rescue of two English speaking non-human children, see attached pictures, with reportedly heavy accents. I have instituted Alien Incursion Protocol Three, I am in the air, my ETA to the site is 45 minutes. Suggest that you wrap up book signing, and rendezvous at site ASAP. Have arranged for Londo, and the mobile command center, to be picked up, and brought to the site. It should arrive before either of us."

Naomi's knees weakened, as she read the message, she grabbed the back of her chair to steady herself, Meghan, the owner of the store stepped over and grabbed her elbow, supported her, and asked. "Are you okay?" Naomi turned and faced the line of fans waiting for autographs, saying, "I'm sorry, I was just informed that my family has been in a terrible accident. I am afraid I will have to reschedule the book signing." The concern, and shock visible on most of her fan's faces was palpable. Several of them said "That is okay." others "I am praying!" she smiled at them all and turned and walked through the door leading to the back offices of the bookstore, and the rear exit.

Megan followed "Sally" out the back door, and watched as she hit the button on her key-fob, a

chirp came from a large blue van with the license plate 'TARDIS'. “Sally” thanked her for her understanding, got into the van, started it, and sped out of the parking lot. When she had driven a block away from the bookstore, Naomi hit a button under the dash, activating the van's siren, flashing lights, and, previously invisible, electroluminescent “FBI” decals on all four sides, and the roof. She inserted a Tac-Net ear bud, tapped a few commands on the van's “touch screen entertainment center” and was connected to the regional office of Homeland Security. She arranged for a State Police escort from Hyden to the site. With that accomplished, she contacted Sebastian.

After a very quick “Hi”, her husband explained that the teams on site reported that it appeared that some, as yet unknown, phenomenon had simply replaced a strip of their “Earth”, about 2/3rds of a mile long, with intact terrain that appeared to be from “somewhere else”. The flora seemed to be essentially identical to Earth flora. However they had recovered two bodies of what they were now referring to as “Trolls”, a man driving a pickup truck west bound had run off of Route 70 onto meadow like grass and hit the trolls from behind. The trolls had been chasing two children. One, male, was described as “dwarf-like”, he spoke with an analog to Irish accented English, the girl, who was described as “elven”, spoke English, with an accent with no known analog.

“Given that the creatures, and children, made it through the phenomenon intact. And that the landscape from the other side did as well. I am operating under the assumption that our kids, along with a large section of the Kansas Turnpike, made it through intact as well. Witnesses report that there were other vehicles on that section of road as well. I have tasked several groups at DHS with retrieving satellite images, and investigating all other potential sources of information. When we arrive on-site they will have an initial briefing for us.”

Naomi responded, “I am en-route, with a State Police escort, and should be on-site in 25 minutes. Has anyone thought to get some psychologists on site for those two kids? They must be pretty shaken up.” “I ordered a full incursion response, as well as instructed the office to activate not only the standard alien-psych team, but two in-state child psychologists that we have on retainer, they are being flown in, along with two pediatric nurses. I placed the activated child psychologists in charge of the children’s handling. We will do everything we can to keep them from being sucked into some careless research program. They are just kids, and they know far more about what's on the other side than any of our tests will reveal. I have used that justification to keep them on-site, at least for now.”

A full incursion response, meant that her husband had completely locked down the site, that DHS, in the person of Sebastian Song, had complete authority over the site, and access to all personnel, and assets, from a Federal level, all the way down to the local dog catcher. A state of martial law existed on site, and over a 25 mile radius from the site. A completely reasonable response, given that there could have been other alien creatures transported by the phenomenon.

As Director of the DHS's Civilization Sustainability Division, her husband was the person who had been tasked with developing DHS's response to several scenarios, including this one. They were running his playbook. And a very significant portion of that playbook, was crafted around the necessity for flexible thinking. When facing the never-before-occurred, one needed to be mentally agile. That was the catch phrase of the Civilization Sustainability Division, mental agility. That was also why the greatest focus was on hiring personnel who were proven out-of-the-box thinkers.

When she, and her State Police escort, arrived at the site, she showed her DHS ID, and was directed to the large, TARDIS blue RV that her husband had had driven down from their home. She parked behind it, and rushed out of the van, and up to the RV's door. When she entered, she found her

husband, along with several others seated along a narrow table in a U shape, facing a large flat screen TV. She took the empty seat at her husband's right.

They were taking questions from individuals split-screened on the flat screen, she recognized President Kasich, Vice President Ryan, Secretary of State Rice, Defense Secretary Cruz, and her husband's titular boss, Secretary Paul. "Sebastian, thank you, and all of your people. Superb job, folks." President Kasich said, to nods and expressions of agreement from those on split-screen with him. He continued, "To be clear, you are recommending, at this point, that we stand down to DEFCON four, and reduce the area under martial law to a one mile diameter circle around the site." "Yes Mr President, we have no reason to suspect any additional phenomenon, or incursions. If if no additional events occur in the next 24 hours, I recommend that we step down to DEFCON Five. We should keep this site under quarantine, as well as keeping the witness under wraps, until you all can decide how best to report this to the American people. I would also like to keep our two otherworldly guests on site. They are under the best of care, and, frankly, I think we should manage their exposure to our culture, and our people. At this point we have no reason to quarantine them for medical purposes, but we probably should for psychological ones." "Sebastian, you are the man on the scene, until this is wrapped up, whatever you need, and whatever you deem best, we will make happen, as expeditiously as is humanly possible." "Thank you Mr President." "Well, we have tied you up long enough, unless anyone else has any additional questions....." No one did. "We will let you get back to it then, keep us informed, as the circumstances best allow." The President disappeared from the split-screen, and the others soon followed.

Naomi spent a few minutes getting up to speed, there really wasn't much more information, they had a partial list of vehicles, and presumed passengers, that had been transported by the phenomenon. She suggested that she assume oversight of the handling of the children. Her husband, who knew her as well as any husband of 27 years knew his wife, readily agreed. She went in search of the kids, they would need someone on their side.

Marcus and Su'san were nearly to the valley of Shang'Ri'Lah, darkspawn had been chasing them for hours. They, and their family, had been forced to leave En'Til'Zha after the Queen's decree outlawing mixed Dwarf/Elf marriages. Under good King Wen'Ces'los all manor of marriage had been tolerated. But Queen EfFlu'Via had quickly done away with most of the tolerant laws established by her husband. Their family had been met by Uncle Mac, who had offered to take them in on his family's farm. "There be work a' plenty fer ye, ye all will be most welcome, ye will." And so their family, plus Uncle Mac had been ambushed by darkspawn on their way through the forest. Two nights ago the darkspawn had killed and eaten his father, last night they had killed and eaten his step-mom. Uncle Mac had taken them aside and told them to wait until the darkspawn were asleep. Then when he had attacked the lone darkspawn keeping watch, they were to run off toward Shang'Ri'Lah. They had run into the forest, listening to Uncle Mac's screams, Marcus was sure that Uncle Mac had given his life for them. He was also sure that he and his half sister were destined for the darkspawn's cooking pot. There was no way they could out run them. Never the less, he carried on, tugging Su'san ever faster through the woods.

It had been daylight for at least an hour when they finally broke out of the forest and into the valley of Shang'Ri'Lah. As they made their way across the valley, they heard darkspawn leaving the trees behind them. The darkspawn were grunting and roaring as they drew ever closer to he and his sister. He refused to look back, knowing that it would only slow them. He saw a circle of flashes with

darkness inside drop down and pass over them. Suddenly they were in a downpour, and it was night! Despite the shock he pulled his sister forward, he could still hear darkspawn behind them. Moments later he heard a crashing sound followed by a muted trumpet of some kind behind them, he could not help but look back. When he did he saw two darkspawn being crushed under the front of some kind of metal wagon. The trumpet sound was coming from it.

Anson Anvil was heading West on Route 70, on his way home from working at Poacher's Packing Plant. He was listening to an audiobook of Robert Jordan's Eye Of The World, he leaned over to turn the volume up so he could hear it over the sound of the rain. The narrator was just saying something about trollocks as Anson looked up from the radio, and saw a bright flash pass over his pickup. Suddenly Route 70 was gone, he slammed on the brakes. Moments later he ran out of blacktop, and his truck dropped several feet onto what looked like meadow. He saw what appeared to be two "trollocks" in front of him, they were chasing two children! Anson aimed the pickup at the trollocks, and hit them doing about 40 miles an hour. He swerved to the right to avoid those poor kids. As his pickup came to a stop, he threw it in park, opened the door, grabbed his rifle from behind the seat, and ran to the two kids who had stopped and were both looking at him with panic filled eyes. He slowed as he got closer to them and knelt in front of them saying, "There now, its OK I got them, they won't be chasing anyone ever again." The two kids came forward, and he wrapped them in a bear hug. "Ya'll are safe now." He knelt there holding the kids and thinking "Where'd Route 70 go?"

A few hours after the man, Anson, had saved them, Marcus and Su'san were sitting alone in a small white room, with a white ceiling, and dark green floor. Nothing was normal, even the chairs weren't made of wood, but metal, and some soft covering that wasn't fabric. The lights were like no other lights he had ever seen before, they glowed with a steady white light, not like oil lamps, torches, candles, or even the Sun. They were among a people he had never seen before, they called themselves "humans", and they were all friendly, even if they had taken them away from Anson. They had checked them for injury, and had done other "tests" that he had never seen the like of before. He was overwhelmed, but he kept up a cheerful act for Su'san's sake. The folks had told them that they were in "Kansas", they weren't home anymore. He was pretty sure that they were never going "home" again.

The door of the room opened, and a woman who appeared to be about their mom's age came in with a big smile. "You must be Marcus, and Su'san, my name is Naomi Song, and I am here to take you for some dinner, if you are hungry?" They both said they would indeed be thankful for some dinner. She took them by their hands, and led them to a room with a feast! Su'san had never seen so much food! Na'Omi called it a Smor'Gas'Bo'red, it was heavenly, she took a little bit of everything, while Marcus took big slabs of meat. His plate was piled high with it! And no one made either of them put any of it back! Na'Omi only suggested that they "leave a little room for dessert." and pointed to a covered table on the side of the room. When they had finished eating, Na'Omi led them to the covered table and lifted the cover back, sweets! So many sweets, she and Marcus took two smaller plates piled with cookies, and cake, and all kinds of "choc'ol'lets". The choc'ol'lets were like nothing they had ever tasted before. Both she and her brother confided that they liked the choc'ol'lets the best of all of the wonderful food they had sampled. Su'san also loved "Pep'si" which was bubbly and sweet, and wonderful. Marcus insisted that he preferred "Co'ke", boys!

After dinner, Na'Omi led them to a room where they could sleep, she showed them how to use the "Show'wer, sink, and toi'let" in the bathroom. She then asked them if she could take a few "pick'churs"

of them, they agreed, and she pointed the flat end of something at them and there were several flashes of light from it. She then showed them the pick'churs of themselves, it was magic! The pick'churs of Marcus looked exactly like him. And he told her that the ones of her looked just like her too. Na'Omi explained that it was a device called a "tab'let", and not magic. She explained that her people had many advanced machines. They talked about mills, and printing presses, and plows, and how all of those would once have seemed magical, but were just newer, better, machines. She liked Na'Omi, she was not only nice, she was kind, and she treated them like people, not curiosities like the others had. And she gave good hugs.

Ten days later, the nightly ritual of tucking their guests in having been completed, Naomi left the prefab complex and headed for their RV. When she arrived, Sebastian was just hanging up his cellphone. "Hi love, how are the kids doing?" "Safe, snug, and sleeping off yet another "feast the likes o' which I ne'er did see!" They exchanged a smile, they were both now fully attached to their two otherworldly wards. As they hugged, and sat together, Londo, their very pregnant retriever, got up slowly, and wagged her way over to them, looking for some attention of her own. In a blink, she disappeared! "Honey, lets grab the bug-out bags and rucks!" Sebastian said as he rushed to a closet toward the back of the RV.

After showing the ladies their new found ability, Galen and Valen set upon the idea, that perhaps, they could bring someone to them. They practiced, they were able to bring Abby, or Ellie, to them from another location. Their attempts to "send" either of the ladies to another location, without taking them there personally, failed. "It would seem that we can 'pull', but not 'push'." Valen said. "Pulling is still pretty awesome." Galen said "Its too bad that we can't use this to bring Mom and Dad here!" "Lets try!" Valen replied.

Moments of concentration, and of failure, later, Galen said dejectedly, "It just isn't working." Ellie hugged him from behind, he loved it when she did that. Abby hugged Valen from behind as well, and said, "Maybe you should try for something smaller." Valen thought at Galen, "*We could try to pull Londo here.*" A moment later a very pregnant Golden Retriever was standing there barking at them, her body wriggling, from her neck to the tip of her tail. "Londo!" Galen shouted. They spent a few minutes getting Londo introduced, and settled. "Lets try pulling mom and dad through one at a time." Valen said. "*Dad first.*" Galen thought. A moment of concentration, and their father was standing in front of them, in camo fatigues, he had a ruck sack on his back, and two heavy duffles in his hands. ".ney its happening!" he shouted, then saw them, and broke into a huge smile. Abby and Ellie let go of Valen and Galen and high-fived each other. The boys concentrated on bringing their mom to them, and failed. "It is not working." Valen said. Galen thought at his brother, "*I feel different.*" "*Me too, I feel weaker.*" "*Yeah, I felt stronger when Ellie was hugging me.*" "Ladies, please resume hugging us." Valen said. The girls, not finding that to be an odious task at all, commenced hugging. A moment later the boys shouted, "Yes!" as their mom materialized, she was dressed and equipped much like their dad was. They hugged their mom and dad, introduced Ellie, and Abby, Galen grabbed Londo's collar, and said, "Everyone catch hands."

Serelynn was in her parlor, using some down time to re-read David Weber's 'Off Armageddon Reef'. Now that she had the occasional bit of down time, she intended to re-read the whole 'Safehold' series, it was one of her favorites. She heard a soft 'sigh' of air displacement, in front of her, followed by her mother's voice, "Daughter." Her head snapped up, dropping the tablet, she sprung out of her

chair. She ran to her parents, as tears filled her eyes. They dropped their duffles, and wrapped her in their arms. Her father looked around and said, "We're not in Kansas any more!"

Raevyn was resting against a tree, she, Mae, and Lyta Tallman were in the clearing, waiting for the other teams to rendezvous with them, for pickup by Serptheah. They would all be back at Jericho Aviary in about an hour and a half. She was looking forward to a hot shower, and hot food. If only they had some chocolate! None of the indigenous population would admit to ever having heard of anything like it. I still hold some small hope that they are lying she thought with a rueful smile.

Her reverie over a hot shower, and warm meal was interrupted by Serelynnne calling her over the Tac-Net, "Rae, something wonderful has happened. We need you, Mae, and Lyta to prepare to be teleported back here, get together, and clasp hands." Her team, who had also heard the message over their ear buds, strode quickly to her side. As they clasped hands, Raevyn said, "We are ready." Before she had even finished saying it, she, Mae, and Lyta were standing in her sister's parlor.

Standing in front of her, were her parents! She and both of her parents said, "Oh my Lord!" at the same time. As they embraced, her father said, "It is so GOOD to have our family together." Her mother said, "Daughter, you've changed, you look just like your sister." "It is a short, wonderful story." She said. Valen and Galen said simultaneously, "She regenerated!" Followed, in a more reverent tone, by "It was a miracle."

"We have had rather a few miracles since our arrival. Your arrival being the latest. Magic, in the form of expressed will, works here." Serelynnne said, "We will explain that in more detail later, right now we need you to meet the other members of our family, and then we need to retrieve Paul, and Danny. Follow me, please." She led all of them into Serptheah's lair.

"Mom, dad, this is my partner, 'Serptheah'. Serptheah, this is our mom, 'Naomi Song', and our dad, 'Sebastian Song'. Serptheah bowed her head, and Serelynnne said, "She says that she is most honored to meet the Delm, and Delmae, of Clan Song. The Liadens," she nodded at her brothers, "have her hooked, she has read all of the novels in the Liaden series, she did so in one week! She didn't sleep for days. We all had to take turns flipping pages on the tablet. Finally, Dan Valdez, who you will meet soon, wrote an Android device driver that used audio recognition to move, and click a virtual mouse, as well as the standard Android 'buttons'. We've ported the driver to Windows, and now she can use both her tablet, and her Zenbook Prime, all by herself. And we can sleep." "Remarkable!" Naomi said.

Valen said, "Sere, Rae, we've discovered what Abby and Ellie's roles are. We haven't decided on an official name for it yet, but they are like 'gift boosters' when they are touching us, we are several times more powerful." Galen added, "That is how we got Londo, dad, and mom here. We couldn't have done it without them." Valen, Galen, Abby, and Ellie, teleported the other two teams back. While Paul and Danny greeted Naomi and Sebastian, the elven, and dwarven members of their teams left, allowing the Songs to have some time together.

Naomi pulled her tablet out of her pocket, she flipped it a bit and showed her sons a picture of Marcus and Su'san. Do you think you could bring these two kids back home? "We can try, please describe where they are, and a little about each of them. Naomi explained where the prefab complex was in relation to Route 70, where the room the kids were sleeping in was located in the complex itself. And a bit about each of the children, especially about how they loved chocolates. Galen, Valen, Abby and Ellie all caught hands, moments later Marcus was laying on the floor, and a few moments after that so was Su'san. As they groggily sat up, Naomi said "Welcome home children." Marcus looked up and saw Naomi, Sebastian, several other humans, and a DRAGON!!! He and Su'san reached out in wonder as the dragon lowered its head to the level of their faces and licked their cheeks one after the other. Naomi said, "Marcus, Su'san, Sebastian, and I would like to adopt you. You would be our children the same as if you had been born of us. Would that be acceptable to you?" As they both nodded, Su'san cried, they were home, and they had a kind family that accepted them no matter what race they were from. And a dragon!

The extended Song clan settled into comfortable chairs, and chaotically brought each other up to

date. Marcus and Su'san who sat on the floor leaning against Serptheah, quickly fell asleep with Londo between them.

Chapter Twelve

Serelynn checked her wristwatch, it was 4:28 Am, Serptheah's bugle had awoken her, she felt immense excitement radiating from her partner. "Serptheah, what is happening?" "*The first of my children is almost ready to hatch! We must get as many of your people as possible to the gallery of the hatching beds!*" "Okay, how much time do we have?" "*I think about 12 minutes.*"

Eight minutes later, most of the humans, and not a few of their dwarven and elven friends, were assembled in the gallery overlooking the hatching beds. The gallery was essentially the back wall of the hatching beds, the front was wide open, and large enough to permit several dragons to stand with their heads over the beds.

There was a buzz of excitement in the air, this was after all the first hatching for all of them, except for Serptheah, who, even so, seemed to be the most excited of all. Serelynn wondered why. "*When he hatches, he will be making history.*" Serptheah answered her unasked question. "You already know that it will be a he?" "*Yes, but even if I did not, it is rare for any of the first few eggs to hatch to be female, men are so often precipitous.*"

He was hot, thirsty, and very hungry, and it was very cramped in here. He wanted out. He began to thrash, and ram his head and snout against his prison. He could hear sounds from beyond the prison walls, and he could also hear the soothing voice in his head. "*It is well my son, this is the way of all dragons, the shell is hard, but you are strong. That's it, you are doing well. My strong boy.*" He felt the prison, the "shell" crack, as he rammed it again, and again. Suddenly, his eyes were filled with pain! "*All is well, son, that is light, you are 'seeing' for the first time, give your eyes a few moments to adjust to the light.*" He rocked and pushed against the crack, suddenly it gave way, and he was able to lift the roof of his prison and stand erect. There were creatures watching him, and making many noises.

Paul saw the shell cracking, and moments later, it broke, and the head of the dark bronze dragon appeared. It stood, and the top portion of its shell fell behind it, as it raised its head. Its forest green eyes surveyed the crowd. When their eyes met, Paul felt like his awareness had blossomed, he felt thirsty, and starved. He also felt great joy, resonating between himself and the Dragon, Paraclete, the name rose up from Paul's spirit. "You are named Paraclete, for we shall stand together, through all that is to come."

Paraclete bugled, echoed by Serptheah, he had a name, and a partner. As he broke free of the shell, and rushed toward his partner, "Paul", the concept of "Paraclete" flowed into his mind: One who stood alongside, a friend, and more, a comforter, advocate, defender, a covenant partner. "*I am Paraclete, as are you.*" Paul heard in his mind. "Indeed, we stand, together." Paul answered, as he wrapped the young dragon in his arms, and carried him over to the waiting "breakfast" that had been assembled for the hatch-ling. Serptheah had explained to them that dragon hatch-lings ate their own weight every four to

six hours, for the first month of their life.

As he fed Paraclete, many of the folks spent a few moments with the two of them, being introduced, congratulating them, and a few, feeding the eager dragon a morsel or two. Soon the satiated dragon was purring, and slipping into slumber. Paul, accompanied by Raevyn, and her family, including Serptheah, carried Paraclete to their “dorm” room.

To facilitate feeding, and training, the young dragons, all of them, along with their partners, would be housed in the same complex. The complex also allowed the dragon's partners to continue to function in their other roles, as there would always be someone to keep the young dragons company. Serptheah had explained to them all, several times, that “*A dragon with an idle mind, means mischief, shenanigans, folderol.*”

Serptheah had “overheard” the definition of “Paraclete”, as Queen she could hear all of the dragons, and their partners. All of the dragons could hear the Queen, but only a small percentage of their partners could hear her clearly. She “tasted” the nuances of the meaning of “Paraclete”, it was the best definition she had ever encountered, of the partner relationship. Her, already considerable, esteem for Paul, grew.

Serptheah was glad that Paul had partnered first, his steady heart, and calm mind, would not only carry him through the “learning curve”, they would also allow him to assist those who would soon be joining him in the process. She also, strongly, suspected that he was a Dragonmage. Partnering first meant that maturing into his “role” would be accelerated. For some reason, partnered humans developed their abilities faster, and seemed to settle into their roles more successfully than those who were not partnered. And Dragonmages were very, very useful.

Raevyn was thrilled, she had hoped to be partnered, but there were still eleven unhatched dragons. And Paul was clearly filled with joy, and awe, at his partnering. She had a lot to look forward to! As did several of the others. She said a silent prayer of thanks, for her family being there, for her miracle, for Paul's love, which she counted a miracle as well, and now, for Paraclete. Serptheah had repeated to Serelynnne what Paul had told Paraclete about his name, and Raevyn had overheard it. Raevyn felt like that was how Paul was toward her, her “Paraclete” as well.

Paul felt like the most blessed of men, he had is God, his wife, and his partner. They had good friends, family, and a purpose. He thought back to the darkness that he had stepped out of on the night that he had met Raevyn. At how far he had truly come, emotionally, spiritually, and physically, since that fateful night. He said a silent prayer of thanks, and caressed Raevyn's cheek. She smiled.

Just after breakfast, Serptheah informed Serelynnne that another of her children was ready to begin hatching. The crowd this time was slightly larger than when Paul had partnered with Paraclete. It was

understandable, folks were awake at this time of day. Most of them had been there for 2, or 3, minutes when the egg had started to rock. The level of excitement was just as high, folks had been talking about Paraclete's hatching all through breakfast.

As the egg cracked, the head of a light brown dragon appeared, it opened it's eyes, which were dark cyan, and immediately met Gunny's eyes. Gunny felt awe, and joy, and love, he marched forward, scooped up the male dragon, and said, "You are Belisarius, named after a legendary general, a great warrior, who out-thought his opponents." Belisarius bugled with joy, he had a name. *"It is a good name!"*

Folks were still congratulating Gunny and Belisarius, when Serptheah notified Serelynne that another of her children was nearly ready to hatch. This time, when the peridot dragon, another male, with dark blue eyes, hatched, it was partnered with Danny Chin, who named it "Katana", which is the name of a traditional Japanese sword, often referred to as a Samurai sword.

Just before lunch, Serptheah announced yet another hatching. When the beautiful, golden, male, dragon, had fully hatched, it scanned the crowd. It's sky blue eyes stopped when they met those of Ellie Pond. As Ellie rushed forward, she said, "You are Agapios, which means a faithful, covenant, spiritual, selfless love. It is also the name of a great servant of God, one who remained faithful, even unto death at the hands of the enemies of God." The golden dragon bugled, and nuzzled her, saying *"I have a name, a very good name. I shall remain faithful, we shall be faithful. and true!"* Abby was the first to congratulate them.

The next hatching took place after lunch, the first of the female dragons, an aquamarine, with brown eyes, surprised everyone, when it partnered with Mae. The elf was nearly hysterical, she had never imagined that she would be a Dragonhero! She named her dragon "Sho'Far" which she explained was the bugle, made from a ram's horn, that led Israel into battle, and also into praise of God. Sho'Far loved her name, she kept bugling!

The next dragon to hatch, a few hours later, was a deep crimson, she had lovely golden eyes. Abby Pond, who had partnered with her, danced for joy, with the dragon in her arms, and said "You are named Garnet, for you are a jewel to behold." After receiving many congratulations, all of the Ponds walked to the dragon dorms, accompanied by Valen, Galen, and Dan Valdez. "This is so wonderful," Heidi said. "We are so proud of both of our girls." Frank added. "We will help you feed them," Valen, and Galen said simultaneously. And Dan Valdez added, "Me too!"

The final hatching that day, was a burgundy male, with lavender eyes, Lauren Khanh, who partnered with it, named it "Winston", after Winston Churchill. She explained that Churchill was a great leader, who stayed the course, and kept his people strong of heart, in their darkest hours. Winston considered it a most auspicious name. Raevyn was starting to feel slighted, she had assumed that because she could hear Serptheah, she would be one of the first to partner with a dragon. Now it was looking like she might turn out to be one of the last, or that maybe she never would be. Not liking the feelings she was experiencing, she went off to be by herself to deal with her emotions and get her head straight.

The next morning, breakfast was interrupted by the hatching of an amethyst female with green eyes, her partner, Miki Coyora, named her "Bushikatagi", which was Japanese for "Warrior Spirit" or "Samurai Spirit". Bushikatagi was most proud!

Later that morning, Amanda Caine partnered with a blue topaz female with golden eyes, she named it "Topaz". That afternoon, the final three hatchings occurred, each an hour or so apart. Steve Starke partnered with "Starwind", a mauve male with black eyes. Mike Jella named his partner "Valiant", Valiant was a sapphire male, with golden eyes. "Sparrow", a khaki female, with green eyes, was partnered with Jessica Darlin. As they were congratulating Jessica, and Sparrow, Valen and Galen asked Jessica if she had named her dragon after Sally Sparrow, she admitted that she had. They told her that they thought it was a great name, and that Blink was one of the best episodes of Doctor Who. Gunny, who was next in line to congratulate them, heartily approved. Raevyn was very disappointed, but she kept telling herself that there were still over 200 remaining eggs. It helped, a little, but not much.

Chapter Thirteen

Seamus was recovering nicely, his arm itched, but that was a good sign. They had tried using healing on him, but being a dwarf, as expected, it yielded very little result, the pain decreased considerably, and they had concluded that his natural healing processes had been accelerated slightly, but that was all. He was grateful for that, at least. The bruises that covered most of his body, were also somewhat better.

He was resting, he'd done a lot of resting these past couple of days, "Doctor's Orders" Jessica, and Lauren had said. Resting, and reading. Gunny had recommended R. A. Salvatore's Icewind Dale Trilogy, Seamus was reading it on the 8.3 inch Android tablet that Valen, and Galen, had let him borrow. Having, so far, read, "The Crystal Shard", and "Streams of Silver", he had just begun reading "The Halfling's Gem", he loved the characters, Catti-brie, Wulfgar, Regis, and especially, Bruenor. What dwarf wouldn't love Bruenor Battlehammer! But Seamus's favorite character was, by far, Drizzt Do'Urden! That drow elf had the heart of a real dwarf! Talk about stalwart! Seamus planned on naming his next son "Drizzt!"

He was settling in for a good, long, read, when his concentration was shattered by a commotion in the hallway leading to his convalescent quarters. The commotion resolved into the sound of the chaos of children on the march. It was his three wives, Gloria, Nichole, and Sarah, and his eight children, John, Patrick, Chelsea, Paul, Amelia, Peter, Amanda, and Rory. They had made it to the Aviary! He carefully blanked the screen on the tablet, placed it on the table beside his couch, and rose, he was soon buried in hugging arms, and loving embrace. It was good to be alive, and especially good to be a dwarf!

Gunny and Mae were out on a two day training patrol. In addition to classroom training, the cadets were each given one on one, hands on training, usually in the form of two day long patrols of the forest. Serptheah had deposited them in a clearing roughly two days south of the Aviary. They would make their way back, familiarizing themselves with the terrain, and Gunny would impart his knowledge, while Mae would acquire some worthwhile experience. All in all, Gunny saw it as a win-win situation. He was really quite impressed with Mae's dedication, the girl had heart, in spades, Gunny heartily approved.

After about half a day's travel, they stopped at a small rock outcropping, as they sat eating their

lunch, they could hear a stream, just to the East of the outcropping, it's burbling was just audible above the cacophony of the birds in the trees around them. When they were about half way through with their lunch, the birds suddenly quieted, leaving the stream as the only sound they could hear. Gunny immediately turned to Mae and hand-signaled "caution, enemy nearby." They quietly collected their packs, and crouched looking around. Mae whispered, "I can sense hundreds of unnatural creatures approaching us from the South." "They must be following our trail." Gunny motioned to her to come close. When she did, he focused on the rock beneath them. A circle of rock about 12 feet in diameter began to raise up around them, it was about two feet thick. As it rose, they began to lower, Gunny was pulling the rock below them out and moving it up to form a dome. When the dome was finished, they had slipped about 6 feet into the rock. The dome over their heads was about 12 feet above the ground, and about 18 feet above them. The top of the dome was solid, but about 10 feet off of the ground there were a series of hundreds of air holes, each about half an inch in diameter. The air holes also provided them with very dim lighting.

Gunny had also raised up a rock sofa that they were sitting in. He was rather fatigued, the concentration, and the adrenaline had taken a bit of a toll on him. They were safe for the nonce, and that was all that was necessary, for the moment he rested. Mae whispered, "They are here." and involuntarily snuggled against him. He, quite voluntarily, put his arm around her and held her close. She felt good in his arms. Maybe it was the fatigue, but Gunny had a hard time taking his mind off of how good she felt. They could hear ogre grunts, and roars, soon joined by the sound of clubs striking the rock dome. Mae could feel the evil around her and Gunny, she started shivering. It was as if she could smell it, and taste it at the same time. It was clear that she was not just a Rocksister, she might be a Dragonmage! She knew, on an intellectual level that the stench was her gift, but on a visceral level it was overwhelming. She mentioned it to Gunny, who lifted her up and settled her in his lap, saying, "I don't envy you that. We will make it through this, but I think we will also have to suggest that we 'salt' the forest with rock shelters that patrols can use for emergencies."

After a while the pounding stopped, moments later they heard lighter "thumps" all around the dome. Curious, Gunny made a stairway up the inside of the dome, and a pair of downward slanting sight holes, each about half an inch in diameter. They each took a sight hole, and it was easy enough to see, the ogres were piling branches, brush, and in a few cases fallen logs against the outside of the dome. Gunny had to raise his estimate of ogre intelligence, unfortunately. They obviously intended to set fire to the brush and logs. He decided that he would rest until things became uncomfortable in the dome.

Mae felt Gunny's hand on her shoulder, and stepped back from the sight hole, as she did both holes disappeared. His hand on her shoulder felt very good, he was a rock of a man, steadfast, someone who could not only be trusted, but counted on. Her heart sank, she had never been in love before, but she knew for certain that she had fallen in love with Gunny. And she was just an elf, not a human, she had to keep reminding herself that his kindness, and his gentleness toward her were just how he was to everyone. She wasn't anything special to him, how could she be.

Gunny followed Mae back down to the rock sofa, this was bad, he knew he was hopelessly in love, she was an elf, why would she be interested in him, in that way? Sure they had some camaraderie, maybe even some friendship going on. That was all. He couldn't hope for more. Well, one thing was certain, he was going to get her out of this, and back safely to the Aviary, no matter what it took. He began mulling over their options as he put his arm around her.

Mae shivered as Gunny put his arm around her, and this time, the ogres had nothing to do with it.

Lord, he felt good holding her. She closed her eyes and leaned against his chest, indulging for a few moments the feelings, that she knew she must hide for a lifetime. Gunny lifted her back into his lap, and kissed her forehead. She sighed. "I am going to get us out of this, my love." he whispered. Mae's eyes flew open, and she looked up into Gunny's eyes.

Gunny panicked, what had he been thinking, how could he do that to her, with all that was going on, all that she was contending with, she surely didn't need him to go and make things more uncomfortable for her. Mae looked up into his eyes and said, "I love you" as tears fell from her eyes. Gunny with tears in his own eyes, kissed her tears, saying "Mae'Tru'Doe, will you make me the happiest man on Atlantia, will you be my wife?" "I will, forever, and always, my dearest love."

Gunny felt invigorated, the fatigue washed away in a flood of joy. He lifted her up, and stood behind her wrapping his arms around her, "Lets get out of here my love." As she nodded, they began to sink deeper into the rock, until they were about 20 feet below the surface. Gunny had created a shaft about 8 feet in diameter, the rock being piled up against the inside of the dome. He then turned on his mag light and asked Mae to do the same. He opened an arched tunnel about 8 feet tall, and 4 feet wide, directly toward the Aviary, shifting the rock along side their shaft and up along the inside of the dome. When the tunnel had reached about 25 yards he led Mae down to its end, and began extending the tunnel, shifting the rock behind them. As he extended it roughly 20 yards, they would move forward, and start excavating another twenty yards. When they were about 200 yards away from the dome, he excavated air holes up to the surface, about 15 feet above the tunnel, and they rested for 10 minutes.

Four hours later, when Mae said she could no longer sense the ogres behind them, Gunny excavated a dome completely under the surface, extended air holes, and they had a celebratory dinner. They spent the night in each others arms. Gunny thought of it as a honeymoon preview. As she lay in Gunny's arms, Mae wondered if there had ever been an elf as happy as she was. She was certain that if they had been, there had never been one MORE happy than she. Her thoughts were lost in Gunny's kiss. Two days later they were married.

The day had finally come, Seamus thanked Jessica and Lauren, for their care, and for their having just removed of his cast. He absentmindedly scratched a myriad of remembered itches as he went in search of Gunny Rockbrother. Gunny was the first true Rockbrother, of this age. Seamus had borne the title of "Rockbrother" before the arrival of the humans, but only because he had become proficient in the lore of the Rockbrothers of olde. His studies had encompassed a foundational knowledge of minerals, metals, and all forms of rock. They had also included descriptions, and diagrams of the great works, that the Rockbrothers of olde had accomplished. When Gunny had befriended him, and subsequently manifested the abilities of a true Rockbrother, Seamus had soon found that his dearest dream had come true. Seamus Rockbrother became a true Rockbrother. And since that day, Seamus had begun to dream even greater dreams.

Gunny had just dismissed his final class of the day, when Seamus, sans cast, darkened the door to the classroom, while at the same time, brightening his day. Gunny quite approved of the somewhat gruff dwarf. Seamus was good people. Seamus handed Gunny his tablet, there was a diagram on it. "While I've been recuperatin', t'has occurred to me that we might be tryin' a few experiments, and seein' as if we might just be able to duplicate the tunnel. If'n we could, we could make an ogre safe "subway" tween the Aviary, and the basement of the Administration building at the Academy. T'would let folks, as

were wantin' to join us, travel unmolested. It would also allow for trade between the Aviary and En'Til'Zha city. Gunny heartily approved, he took Seamus, and his idea, to Serelynne. Serelynne also approved.

The next morning found Gunny, Seamus, Valen, Galen, Ellie, and Abby assembled at the plateau above the existing tunnel. Gunny, and Seamus, took turns, augmented by Ellie or Abby, at forming giant “plugs” of rock, roughly 60 feet across, 25 feet high, and 50 feet deep. When a plug had been formed, Galen, and Valen, augmented by Abby and Ellie, would make physical contact with it, and teleport it away. They were storing them at the bottom of the valley, for later use in other projects.

An hour's worth of work had sufficed to open a sloping tunnel a few hundred feet deep, capped with a door like the garage door, albeit, not yet equipped with a water driven apparatus to open and close it. They had simply teleported the door to the plateau for temporary storage. The next hour yielded another 1000 feet of tunnel, by lunch time they had “excavated” just under a mile's worth of tunnel. They had worked out a fairly efficient system, while one of them formed the plugs, with help from one of the Pond ladies, the other, with help from the other of the Pond ladies, “rested” by forming air vents up to the surface. The air vents were secure, they were formed of solid rock, and capped with massive rock domes, with air holes small enough that nothing larger than a mouse would be able to get in. The rock excavated from the vents was pushed up to form the domes, they were quite formidable.

After lunch, having reached a depth that allowed for a level tunnel, they began experimenting to see just how large a “plug” they could form, and teleport. They stopped experimenting when they had reached 500 feet long plugs. Anything longer would be just too difficult to “settle” in the area they were storing the plugs in. By dinner time, their tunnel had reached 1/3rd of the way to En'Til'Zha city. Luckily, they did not have to walk back to the Aviary, they teleported back.

The next day they “rested” by limiting themselves to forming the “pipes” through the mountain to supply the water to power the door they had temporarily stored at the plateau. Along with the apparatus to manipulate it. The most difficult part was aligning the door again, in the end they just reformed it, and the walls of the doorway, to mate each other.

With a working door, they spent the next two days completing the tunnel between the Aviary and the Academy. Finishing the Academy end off with a thinner metal door, balanced so perfectly that a crew of three men could open or close it using a large turnstile that drove the gearing of the door's apparatus. It worked so well that they were considering replacing all of the other “garage” doors with ones like it.

Over the next few days, they worked at excavating barracks at the Academy end, as well as every 5 miles along the tunnel. This would allow for not only security, but also nightly respite for travelers. It was also decided that the plugs that had been stored on Academy grounds would be used in time to wall in the Academy, fortification was a good thing.

It had been a lot of work, mostly hard concentration, but Gunny noted that as a team, they had “tightened” their relationships, and settled into a very productive rhythm. He also noted that the experience had brought the Song boys and the Pond girls even closer together. Gunny approved, he was so certain that they would soon be getting married, that he had been collecting bits of gold to form their wedding rings from.

Seamus was delighted, he was, his dream had been accomplished, well one of them, and the Song boys and Pond girls had been instrumental in their success. As he listened to “Lucky One” by

Honeychain play on his 3.5 inch Android tablet, he looked over at them, sitting hand in hand in pairs, talking conspiratorially, it wouldn't be long before there were going to be a double wedding, he was certain. So certain that he had been collecting gold to make them wedding rings from.

Serelynn was well pleased, the tunnel between the Aviary and the Academy was completed, now all she needed were the personnel to staff the barracks. She would speak with Ken, Mag, Frank and Heidi, they would need, she thought, perhaps as many as 100 men and women to secure, and staff the barracks. They probably could start with half of that, assuming that they had that many volunteers. It would benefit them all to have increased security, as well as increased trade.

Chapter Fourteen

As Mae's final pre-graduation assignment, she and Raevyn were out on a week long patrol. At approximately noontime on the 4th day of their patrol they entered a clearing, intending to eat their lunch. As they settled in, a dragon appeared over the trees. It was very dark in coloration. In fact, as it glided to a landing in front of them, Raevyn saw that it was black. It was beautiful. As it stood there before them, its wings began to thrum with a rhythmic beat. Raevyn's heart synchronized to the beat of the dragon's wings. She struggled to keep her head up. The dragon was so lovely, she wanted to go to it, to touch it. She heard a voice in her mind, *"At last! There you are. I have been searching for you. They tried to keep us apart, but it is our destiny to be together."* "What, what do you mean?" Raevyn asked aloud. *"We are destined to serve my father, the glorious Black Lord, together. Consider, when none of their hatch-lings accepted you, did that not make you feel unworthy? They rejected you."* the black dragon said. It then continued, in a confiding tone, *"It is true that you are flawed, imperfect, barely worthy of my perfection. But, you are destined to be mine, to love me, to serve me. To serve the Black Lord at my side."* At her side Mae cried out "Master!" and fell to her knees. Raevyn felt strongly compelled to do so as well, but she resisted. *"Why do you resist. Look! See! Am I not the most beautiful creature you have ever seen? Listen to the music of my wings, let their rhythm carry you to my feet. It is your destiny to serve me. You who are unworthy. Consider how you have failed, failed in so many things. Be thankful that I am willing to accept one so flawed."* In her mind, Raevyn felt the weight of all of her failings. She had so many flaws. She felt beaten down by guilt. She was drowning in shame. It was true, she was unworthy. She was a failure, had made so many bad decisions, so many foolish choices. Her knees started to weaken. *"I accept you, though you are flawed, because it is your destiny, and because I am generous."* the voice in her head purred. Suddenly, she saw Paul, standing there in front of everyone, thanking God for her. Felt her joy as he pledged before God to be her husband. Basked in Paul's love, his belief in her, his faith in God. *"Worship me, child."* the black dragon said sweetly, condescendingly. Paul had helped her to believe in herself again, to feel that she might be acceptable to God, just as she was. She remembered the proof of God's acceptance, the gift of her transformation, its proof of His eternal love. Raevyn smiled. The black dragon, sensing the loss of its influence over her, screamed in her mind, *"Worship me, or die."* Raevyn stood tall. She lifted her head, and said, "I will not serve you, nor will I worship you. I serve the One, True, God. Though I am indeed flawed, He is not yet finished with me, I remain His workmanship, His 'Poema'. I am a God-breathed Poem!" In the deepest part of her heart, in a still, small, voice, Raevyn heard, *"You have stood your ground against the darkness, you have been a shadow, and now you are My song."* She felt liquid love being poured over her head, it felt like honey, or thick oil, as it flowed down over her shoulders, and covered her abdomen, she noticed that she had begun to glow. She let go of her M16, it swung on its strap. She raised her right arm, and a sword of flame materialized in her hand. It stretched out before her, stopping when it had reached a length of about six feet. Despite its length, it felt weightless. The

black dragon screamed in rage, and flamed at her. As they neared her glowing body, the flames became mist, then vanished. She was shielded. She stepped forward, and, using two hands, swung the sword of flame, and removed the dragon's head. As dark black streams of It's blood, driven by it's still beating heart, spewed out, it's wings slowed, and stopped. It's legs gave way and it toppled to the ground. Behind her, Mae let out a sob. Raevyn turned to her, and let go of the sword of flame. It vanished. She fell to her knees in front of Mae, and wrapped the elf in her arms. "It is over now, that thing is dead." "Oh, Raevyn, I feel so, dirty. I knew it was wrong to do so, but I just couldn't stop myself, I wanted it, needed it, I am weak, dirty, unworthy." Raevyn lifted the girl's head until they were eye to eye, "Hear me, Mae'Tru'Doe, hear me, it was NOT your fault. It used a combination of hypnotic sound, and mental compulsion. I barely resisted it, and only then because Paul has been helping me to overcome my own feelings of unworthiness, because God has given me a miracle. And, at the end, because He strengthened my heart." In her heart Raevyn heard, "*You are My paladin, My Spirit is upon you, My flame fills your heart.*" She wiped the tears from Mae's cheeks, caressed her, and said, gently, lovingly, "Mae, my dear, dear, friend, be whole of heart, know that you are blameless." As she said that, her hands glowed, Mae began to glow, and fell back to the ground. Raevyn laid her hand on Mae's chest, and said, "Peace." She stood over the elf, guarding her, until the girl stopped glowing, and sat up. She clasped hands with Mae, and helped her to stand. "Lets take a few pictures of this thing, and head home." "Are you sure you do not want to take the head back, you could have it mounted in your parlor." the girl said. Raevyn knew then that her friend was back to normal, she was such a clever elf! "Hmm, I considered doing that, but concluded that it was not worthy" Raevyn deadpanned.

Serelynnne was hit by a wave of joy coming from Serptheah, at the same moment, all of the dragons bugled in triumph. "*She did it! She did it!*" Serptheah said in her mind. Serelynnne watched in amazement as the massive dragon danced! She heard Serptheah shout in her mind, "*Hallelujah, salvation, glory, honor, and power belong to our God!*" The excited dragon danced to her and said, "*We must move the last of my eggs to the hatching bed! She has done it! Raevyn has slain the Darklord's son! She has withstood the temptation of a black dragon, she is worthy!*" "Worthy?" Serelynnne asked. "*She is worthy to partner with the white dragon!*" Galen and Valen ran up to them and, looking at Serptheah, said, "She called us!" Serelynnne said, "She wants you to take us to Raevyn."

Raevyn, having taken several pictures of the slain dragon, was putting her tablet away, when Serelynnne, Valen, Galen, and Serptheah appeared in the clearing. Serptheah bugling a note of triumph, rushed to Raevyn. She nuzzled her massive head against Raevyn's chest. In her mind Raevyn heard, "*Oh, well done, very well done. You have stood the test. You have resisted the temptation of a black dragon, you are proven worthy. You shall partner with my daughter, the white dragon, you, and she, shall stand against the Darklord. Know that you shall, for he is but another black dragon.*" Raevyn giggled as she watched the massive dragon dance around the clearing. When Serptheah had come to a stop, Galen asked, "Serptheah, how is it that we are all hearing you now?" "You have blossomed, your whole family has grown, you can all hear me now. I have always been able speak to your sisters, and as you and your brother came into your gifts I began to hear you. And now, finally, you can hear me." Looking at them all she added, "While Galen, Valen, and I have kept it a secret that I could hear them, the secrets must end now." She looked at the boys, and Valen said, "We can also hear one another, we have been able to since we arrived here." "We kept it a secret because it was too cool a tool for practical jokes." Galen hastily added, "But we agreed, right from the start, that if there was an emergency, or if it became otherwise necessary, we would tell you." "And, apparently it is now necessary." both boys looked at Serptheah. "*The Darklord will soon know that his spawn has been defeated, and killed. He will marshal his dark forces, and they will soon be directed against us. A time of great conflict shall*

soon be upon us. And, other than I, you will not have mature dragons to fight with you, for nearly a year." Serelynnne said, "And we will not risk you Serptheah, you are our only Queen, and we need the knowledge that you possess, it must be passed on to the new generation of dragons." Turning to her brothers she said, "Take us back to Serptheah's parlor, please." They all clustered around Serptheah and hugged her. *"Its good to be the dragon!"* Serptheah thought at them. "You had to introduce her to Mel Brooks" Serelynnne said, smiling at her brothers, "didn't you!" as they vanished from the clearing.

Eleven days later, Valen and Abby, Galen and Ellie, had just sat down to start watching Star Trek Into Oblivion, when Serptheah spoke to their minds, *"Galen, Valen, you must get Raevyn, and take her to the egg immediately."* They each took hold of one of the girl's hands, and teleported Raevyn to them. They all stood, and then Valen, and Galen, teleported them all to the egg bed. A black dragon was gliding in to a landing, just outside of the egg bed. Dan was on it's back. *"I know what you did to my brother, I will not suffer his fate. As long as one of you serves me, I possess all of your abilities. I have come for the egg. If you allow me to take it, I shall allow you to live. I will even give you this weak minded one back."* it said to their minds, as its wings thrummed. Galen and Valen took themselves and the girls to Serptheah's parlor. They then concentrated, and a moment later Dan was there on the floor between them and Serptheah. Raevyn watched Dan disappear, her brothers and the girls were also gone. No doubt they had concluded that distance from the black dragon might lessen its influence. She heard a "thwacking" sound from behind her. An elf, who she did not recognize, had snuck into the egg beds, and was hacking at the egg with a halberd, she watch it hit the egg for the 4th time, and saw the egg start to crack...

End of book one: Dragonheroes Of Atlantia, Arrival.

Epilog

Benito was in his room, watching Gotham on his 8.3 inch tablet. It was one of his favorite TV series, he especially loved the Joker, what a great character! Someone had bombed a chocolate factory. Who would bomb a chocolate factory, didn't they know how much he would give for a bar of chocolate! He thought of the chocolate factory near his house, and how he and his dad had gone on a tour of the factory last year. They had seen how the different kinds of chocolate bars were poured, and extruded, filled, wrapped, and boxed. At the end they had gotten to sample all of the different kinds in the shipping warehouse office. That warehouse was full, with hundreds of pallets each stacked with dozens of boxes of chocolate! Benito closed his eyes and imagined a pallet here in front of him, he could almost smell the chocolate! Wait, he DID smell chocolate, he opened his eyes and there was indeed a pallet of boxes of chocolate in front of him. He ran out of the room, calling his dad, but not before opening one of the boxes and grabbing a handful of chocolate bars.

Afterward

Throughout the book I make reference, direct, or oblique, to several books, TV series, movies, and characters that I love and enjoy. They form, if you will, the "geek culture" of the protagonists. More information about each can be found at <http://www.dragonheroes.org/arrival/credits.htm>

Information about future books in this series, or additional series I may end up writing, will eventually appear at <http://www.dragonheroes.org/future.htm>

