

JAKE

**BOOK ONE OF
THE FIRST YEARS**

**By: J Barrett
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PROLOGUE

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

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

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

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 It was a small out of the way base, used to mothball old and out of date jets.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

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

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

The world was about to change.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

With racing hearts they quickened their pace.

NEW WORLD

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

And then they came.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Oh - did I mention that Jake was a dragon?

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

Lady Jennie is Michael's dragon.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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