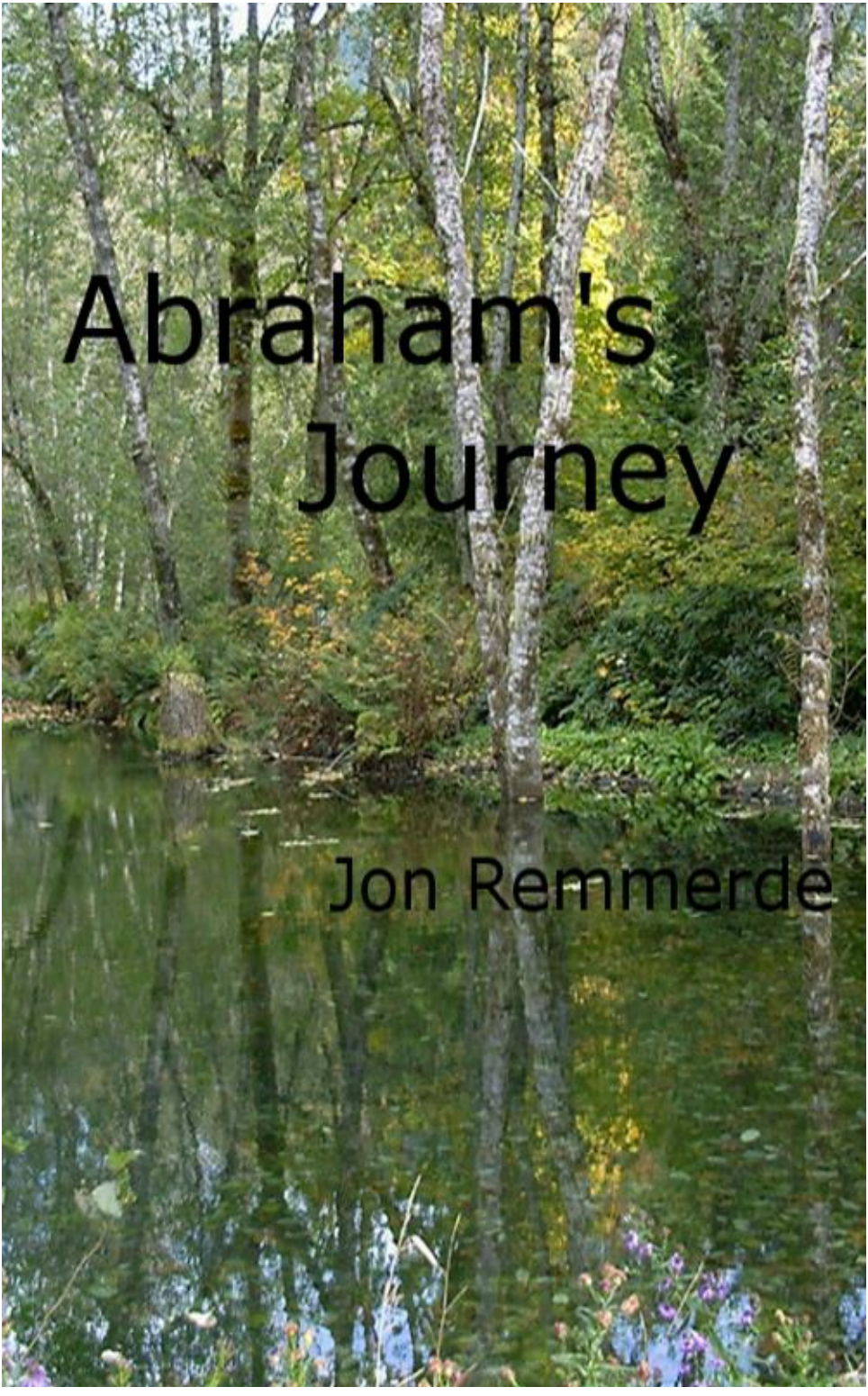

Abraham's Journey
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Chapter 1: Winter in the Castle

Snow lay deep in the castle's walkways, turrets, and courtyards, and on all the land around. Cold wind blew across the frozen river, twisted around the castle, and searched in through gaps and cracks in stone walls.

Cold wind penetrated the room high in the castle's south face, and Abraham, tall and thin, with thinning white hair and weathered skin, pulled his chair closer to the fire and tucked his heavy furs tightly around himself. He sat close to the fire and gave no thought to the future.

But then, early spring breezes blew warmer across the snow. Great, hollow, booming sounds echoed across the valley that held the castle through the long winter as ice cracked, shifted, piled, and jammed in the river and began to melt into the rising current.

Sun warmed the castle's south wall and cast bright squares of warmth through the windows to the dark stone floor. Abraham stood at the balcony window and looked down through stark grey treetops at the river of melting ice, running full in its channel.

Clouds rolled down off the mountains. Rain blew in spring wind and melted snow into the river. Water rushed and rumbled toward the sea, ran over the river banks, and echoed its roaring sounds into the corners of his stone room. Damp air drove to his bones even more than the intense cold of winter had. He built his fire up hot.

Rain stopped. Sun warmed the ground. Breezes spread moisture thin in sunlight.

Plants burst from the soil. Abraham walked away from the fireplace and looked out at spring, green on the earth. He smelled the fertile earth, the young green plants, and the first flowers. The dull, persistent ache of cold in his bones eased and slowly disappeared.

Restlessness replaced the ache of cold winter and took deep root. He paced about the room and sighed deeply. He stopped in front of his suit of armor.

It had not mattered when he hung his armor on the wall that it was rusted and dented, because he had promised himself he would leave it hanging on the wall. He had promised himself he would live the rest of his life in quiet peace and comfort in a warm and well-sheltered home.

He rubbed the metal, looked at the rust that came away on his fingers, and grumbled, "It was snowing then. It's easy to make a promise like that when there's snow on the ground and snow in the air and more snow being

made in heaven, and the rivers are frozen. Those are easy times to promise to sit in front of a fire and dream of adventures that have been adventured and wait for time to pass."

He lifted his sword from its hook, drew it from its scabbard, and held it high in front of him. His armor was rusty and dented, but his sword, more than half as long as Abraham was tall, and broad across the blade, shone clean and sharp, caught the firelight and reflected it dancing in sharp crystal shafts.

Clanger, he had named his sword when he was young and among the first into battle, for it had struck clanging on many suits of armor, sent its sound ringing across the battlefield in high and even tones. It had split armor and brought him victorious from many battles.

He swung his sword in both hands. It whirred through the air like a hawk turning in a steep dive. He studied the blade, then slipped it back into its scabbard and rested it on its point on the floor. He stared at the dark, high window and said, "Honor's honor, and a promise is a promise, and that's all there is to say about that."

He hung the sword back alongside his armor on the wall. He crossed the stone floor and stood in front of the fire. He said, "But we shall see what we shall see," and he didn't settle so deeply into his chair. He didn't gaze into the fire as much as he thought and built ideas. When restlessness stirred, he let it rise until he tapped his foot on the hearth and drummed a hoofbeat sound with his fingers on the arm of the chair.

Chapter 2: Spring Comes to the Land

The last of the snow in the valley melted into the river. Abraham walked from his room, down through the castle and out through bright sunshine to the stable. He stood in spring sunshine and talked to his horse, who put his head out over the half door of his stall into the sunshine. Charger, dapple grey, who had gone even more to grey, was also old, thin in the flesh and high in the bone.

Abraham said, "Well, a promise is a promise, and honor holds me to it. But what I promised was never to go into battle again. I promised to be done with seeking out adventure, and I promised to hang my armor and never take it down again. I promised to settle into a home and toast my toes in front of the fire and never again court frostbite and the hard times of campaigns and short rations and cold nights without campfires for fear of the enemy."

He dug the toe of his boot into the damp earth. Birds sang in the shrubbery and flew from tree to tree. Horses stamped and whinnied. Wind twisted around them and blew off into trees. He looked away from Charger, out into the deep blue sky. Between Abraham and the sky, a nuthatch hopped up the trunk of a pine tree.

"I also promised you wouldn't have to be saddled and ridden again. That was part of the promise." He turned to look at his horse again and spoke firmly. "But I didn't promise to rot here. I could go somewhere and not seek out adventure. I wouldn't want to go into battle again. And my armor is worn and dented and maybe a little too big now anyway. It always was heavy and clumsy. And about the home; well, this castle just doesn't feel like home to me. Never has. Oh, it's a nice castle, and I like it, but it doesn't have the feel of home to it.

"I could get an outfit of light chain mail, since I'm used to having some armor. I never did promise to leave Clanger hanging there. A sword isn't part and parcel with a suit of armor, but's separate from it. And spring is here, and I wouldn't freeze or go short rations in spring or summer. All my life I've wanted to see what's in those Red Mountains up there, and I won't be fearing any enemy up there. There aren't any people in those mountains for anyone to have as enemies."

The horse gazed at the man.

Abraham laughed. His laughter echoed through the barn. He said, "You'll go too. I won't saddle you, and I won't ride you, but I'll put a little pack on my back, and a bigger pack on your back, and I'll walk, and you'll walk too."

The horse neighed and stamped his foot and went back to eating oats, and Abraham said, "There's wild game and green meadows full of tender grass on those mountains." He looked toward the mountain peaks that were still deep in snow. He put more oats in the trough and said, "If we did run across any adventure up there, it wouldn't be from seeking it, that's sure."

Chapter 3: The Journey Begins

Very early on a spring morning, when colors had not yet separated out of first light, Abraham scurried indoors and out of doors, banging doors behind him as he gathered equipment and provisions, sorted, arranged, and rearranged, packed, tied, buckled, and strapped.

Charger whinnied and pawed at the door of his stall. Abraham laughed and said, "Don't kick that door down. You're going with me, but I have to

get everything ready before we can go. We're going into unknown country, and anything we forget is something we won't have at all.

"I have Clanger and bacon and flour. And salt and beans and tea. And oats and molasses, and biscuits and cheese and tinder and flint and tinder box. And hoof-trimming tools, and a kettle and a pan. And a sling to hold your pack with, make do without a saddle. And a chain-mail vest and clout and only the smallest of shields. Two changes of underwear, three changes of socks, and leather britches for going through brush. Thread, needles of several sizes and kinds, rope, string, buttons and thongs, and a fish net and a little bit of snare wire. And a curry comb and a brush. And my small flute and my large flute. And some odds and ends of cloth, in case we need odds and ends of cloth."

The eastern sky turned yellow and red and gold. Abraham led Charger out of his stable. He strapped the pack onto him, cinched it tight, and loaded it.

They walked up the road through locust trees that opened new, pale green leaves. Abraham didn't move as fast as a young man would, but he was tall and sure and he strode steadily forward. Clanger swung at his side. His vest and clout sparkled in the morning's earliest sunlight. He held the braided rope loosely, a link to his horse, but not really a lead. The horse wanted to go and did not need to be pulled. Horse and man stepped high, even steps toward the top of the valley, where the road narrowed and turned up the Red Mountain.

Their steady pace put them well on their way before the sun rose. By midday, they reached the top of the valley. Abraham ate cheese and biscuits, and the horse ate tender, spring grass.

All afternoon, they climbed the gently-sloping foothills. They walked through forest of evergreens and of deciduous trees offering new green leaves to early spring. They walked across broad meadows of newly green, rapidly-growing grasses. Early wildflowers opened blossoms into sunshine.

The sun set. Dusk's graying light washed the mountain. Abraham camped by a small stream that runs from the Red Mountain toward the river in the valley. As the moon rose above jagged mountain peaks, Abraham curled in his sleeping robe next to the dying fire.

The horse stood beneath the evergreens along the stream and slept on his feet. He woke sometimes during the night and watched some small animal scurry by and shy off from his presence into the brush.

Chapter 4: High on the Mountain

Abraham slept with Clanger close by him. The horse slept standing beneath the trees. High up in the mountain, the dragon walked up from the depths of his cavern and looked out at the cold, clear night. The trees down the slope stood taller above the melting snow than they had the last time he came to look. Dark patches of bare ground showed through white snow. He settled down just inside the entrance to his cavern, curled his tail around him, and watched the progress of the night.

Day tinted the sky with light tones. The dragon stretched through all his great length. He left his cavern and picked his way downhill between snow drifts. He drank from cold, clear water that bubbled from a fissure in stone and spread out through dense moss. He followed the water down the slope. Springlets and melting snow joined the water and built it to spring torrent. Running water sang of spring and ate its way into the earth, building a canyon.

Where the stream dropped steeply and flowed through dense brush, the dragon left the flowing, falling water and walked along the top of the ridge above the stream. Green shoots and pulpy red snow flowers pushed up in open ground between snow drifts. As he walked down the ridge, he found gentle, warm breezes.

He didn't return to his cavern that night nor the next night nor the one after that. He rested beneath trees in places where the earth held spring warmth. He slept lightly until morning sun warmed his blood again. Then he explored more of the spring world.

Chapter 5: The Man and the Horse High on the Mountain

Abraham and his horse left gentle slopes behind and started up a steep ridge that climbed the Red Mountain. They left man-traveled trails behind and walked animal trails or the broad, untracked spread of pine and fir forest.

Abraham slept by the fire and dreamed of times gone by. As the days fell behind them, and they journeyed farther up the mountain, Abraham began to leave behind dreams of time past. His dreams became something that had only begun.

When he woke, sunlight shone through the forest. The ashes of the night's fire had gone cold. If he could remember his dreams, he thought, he would begin to know what his future would be.

While he built the fire to cook his breakfast, he tried to remember the actions that created the few vivid images he could remember from his

dreams. The images he remembered held powerful suggestions that refused to emerge into any recognizable background. His waking thoughts could capture very little from his dreams.

He ate his breakfast, walked out, found Charger, and brought him in for oats. He said, "Time to head on up the mountain. That mountain is in my dreams, and things about the mountain are familiar and yet very strange, as if I've been there but can't quite remember it, or as if I've started to remember it without ever having been there." Then he was silent.

As the days passed, he talked less than he had before. As he began to leave his memories behind him when he became caught up in the present unfolding into the future, so he began to leave spoken words behind him as he became more a part of the environment that had no spoken words. Now, when he did speak, the words resounded in the air around him, loud and echoing and unnecessary. Or he spoke and heard only the memory of quiet in the forest.

Abraham and Charger traveled almost in silence. The horse's hooves scuffed softly in the pine duff and clopped hollow against exposed rock surfaces. Abraham picked the quietest ways to go. He breathed softly so he could hear the world around him.

In late afternoon, in the high forest of the Red Mountain, sunlight shone between trees, just before sunset. A heavy ground mist rose as high as the first branches and broke the light into milky, drifting swirls. Abraham and his horse moved silently, wraith-like through the mist and darkening forest.

As the last light ebbed down into the hollows and soaked into the still-damp earth, they stopped. As he often did now, Abraham decided not to build a fire. He set the packs on the ground, lay down close to them, and pulled his sleeping robe around himself.

Chapter 6: They Meet on the Mountain

In the last light of the day, the dragon saw the horse and the man walk out of the heavy mist toward him. He gathered himself to run, but it was already too late; he would be seen and then followed. He lay still. He thought they might pass him by in the dim light, and he could slip quietly into the night.

But they walked toward him. They stopped, and Abraham dropped the packs to the pine duff. He spread his sleeping robe on the ground and curled up right against the dragon's flank. Charger smelled the dragon and

stamped and snorted, but he sensed less to fear from serpent-like quietness than from battlefields where swords and spears and bits of metal flew and rent flesh in the midst of clangorous battle. He moved off a ways, alert but relaxed.

The dragon breathed in slow, even movements, and waited. He had not been as alert as he should have been, but that was done with. Now he would wait to see what would happen. He watched the gradual change in the stars as the earth turned in its place in the universe.

The moon rose and shone clear yellow light through the trees. Moonlight glowed golden in the rising, turning mist. Spring smells, of growing plants, of clean earth and air drifted in the mist. The dragon's eyes glowed green and golden in the night.

Abraham dreamed dreams that were both troubled and beautiful. He dreamed he floated in the ocean. He rose and fell with the long, smooth swells of the ocean's surface.

A sea gull, white wings spread against the setting sun, glided close to the surface of the water, swooped above him, and was gone. The sun set into the ocean in a swirl of purples and reds and oranges.

As darkness settled to the water, a hot wind rose, scoured the surface of the sea, and sent waves tossing and pitching. Things without names, slimy and cold and then rough and hot, grasped at Abraham from the water. He was afraid. He could see nothing in the darkness, and he could not escape the ocean as it pulled him under. He cried out. In his sleep, he moaned and turned in his robe.

He opened his eyes to moonlight and saw green and golden reflections of moonlight close above him. He felt the gradual motion of what he was leaning against and thought all of it was part of his dream. He closed his eyes and slept again.

The dragon felt Abraham stir and looked down at him, saw him open his eyes and shut them again. The dragon lay still. He had become sure, when he saw the old man and the old horse, he could escape from them and be gone before they recovered enough from surprise to react to the sudden fact of his presence, but something held him, some sense of curiosity, some feeling that more could develop in his existence than the repetitious years on the mountain his life had become, some stirring sense of destiny.

He wasn't sure what held him. He knew he might be making a mistake, even a fatal mistake, but he waited out the night.

The sun rose. Wisps of mist spiraled up through the treetops, thinned and cleared in warming sunshine.

Abraham sat up and rubbed his eyes. He still felt tired after the restless

night of strange dreams. Part of his dreams swirled in colors in his memory, rose and dissipated like mist in sunlight.

He watched his horse for a moment and then whistled. Charger looked at him and circled and stamped but wouldn't come closer. Abraham thought something heavy hung in the air, an unfamiliar odor, a remnant of the night's darkness clinging to morning's brightness. He tried to shake lingering dreams from his mind. He leaned back and felt something strange about what he leaned against.

Without turning to look, he reached behind him and touched it. It was hard and smooth and cool to the touch, with ridges and roughnesses, not at all like rock, and not at all like a tree. Then he remembered golden and green light above him during the night, part of a dream, and yet not like a dream at all.

He tried to turn. Fear, dread, excitement froze him. He tried to gather his thoughts and remember how to move.

He looked to his right and saw the thick, orange tail curled heavily on the pine duff. The forked end was not ten feet from him. He turned his head farther and saw the tail curve upwards into the enormous bulk against which he leaned. He closed his eyes and told himself he was dreaming; he would wake and watch the sun rise into the clear, bright morning, and he would remember this dream and be puzzled by it and shake it from his mind in the morning air.

The dragon took a slow, deep breath, and Abraham felt his side rise. He knew what he was experiencing was not a dream. He rolled away from the dragon, rose to his feet and ran. He shouted a long, high sound that he brought up from the bottom of his intestines without fully understanding that the sound came from him. He ran to his packs, where he had left Clanger. He pulled his sword from its scabbard and turned, ready to fight the dragon’s attack.

The dragon had not moved. It watched him from its ancient eyes, and Abraham was struck through with fear, tried to move, and couldn't. He looked at the huge, orange-red and green bulk of the dragon. He realized he had slept against it, curled against the massive haunch. His knees trembled and his mind went nearly blank.

He gathered himself and shouted again. The sound vibrated the morning. He swung his sword in a howling arc through the morning air. He attacked. He aimed for the dragon's eyes and swung the heavy blade with all his might. The dragon moved his head.

The sword cut the morning air, sliced deeply into the ground, and stuck. Abraham, unable to check his charge and unwilling to let go the sword, pivoted a heels-outmost arc above the sword, slammed flat to the

ground, and let go. He stared blankly as pain washed the clear blue sky to black. He thought he must try to take a breath, and he tried and tried, and then he did.

The dragon pulled the sword from the ground and looked it over. He breathed steady flame on it. It heated red and melted. He ate the liquid metal and spit out the jewels that had encrusted the handle.

Abraham tested muscles and bones to see if he could move, and he could, so he sat up and looked around. He couldn't remember where he was. Stiffly and slowly, he stood up. He turned around and saw the dragon and then remembered. He moved his arms and legs, flexed muscles, still testing. "I think you've broken my bones."

"If you have broken bones, they come from your own foolhardiness. I only moved out of your way."

"Where's my sword?"

The dragon belched. Flame burst from his jaws and scorched the grass in front of him. He patted the grass with his front feet, put out the fire, and said, "I ate it."

"You ate it? You had no right to do that."

"It wasn't bad, for a snack. There are some jewels and decorations that didn't go down well, so I spat them out."

"Well, let's get on with it."

"With what?"

"I'm without a sword and slowed down from landing so hard, but I do have my belt knife. I will give you what scrap I can. Your move, isn't it?"

The dragon chuckled. Flames rolled up his long throat and burst out in puffs of black smoke. "Oh. I see. A battle to the death. Is it always a battle to the death when a man meets a dragon?"

"Always."

"What do you know of dragons?"

"I know they are serpent-like and loathsome. They steal and eat young maidens."

The dragon spat. "I don't eat flesh. I eat coal, fallen trees, iron ore, silver, quick-silver, serpentine, and green vegetation. Seaweed when I can get it, though it sizzles my smoke. Where did you learn about dragons?"

"From many different people."

"Did any of them ever see a dragon?"

"I'm sure some of them did. There are many stories about dragons."

"Wouldn't you be wise to believe what you see and hear yourself before you believe stories told by people who have never seen a dragon?"

"I see what you mean. But I see you now, and you strike me full of fear. You look loathsome to me and monstrous."

"You have little regard for the feelings of other creatures."

"I am known as a compassionate man."

"You came upon me in the night and slept against my side, and I offered you no harm. When you woke, you attacked and tried to kill me. You blamed me for hurting you when you slammed yourself to the ground. I disposed of the sword you meant to kill me with, and you called that unfair. You tell me I am fearful and loathsome, and you think of me as deceitful and treacherous. As you stand there, you test your strength and wonder if you can spring at me with your knife, catch me unready, and kill me. Doesn't what you tell me about dragons fit you better than it fits me?"

"Why then, in all the stories, is it always a battle to the death when man meets dragon?"

"Why indeed?" The dragon laid his head down between his front feet. "You came upon me and attacked me. If you had slain me, wouldn't it have been another story of man and dragon battling to the death, with man gloriously victorious? You would have seen any movement I made as a move against you. If I tried to escape, you would have thought I fought you."

"It's more than I can take in. Do you intend to destroy me?"

"No."

Abraham walked a wide circle around the dragon and walked to his horse. "Then we'll be going. We'll just get these packs loaded up and be on our way. I'm feeling a great deal better now that I'm moving around. Oh. Sorry. You moved, and I really couldn't keep from jumping. I had no intention of offending you. Well, we're ready. Good day."

Chapter 7: Abraham Thinks Again

Abraham and Charger started back down the mountain, kept a rapid pace, and sometimes stopped to look behind and to listen. When darkness settled on the mountain, they camped without a fire. "I think he may come in the night, when we're asleep. It's really unfortunate that Clanger is gone. If the dragon comes, you must run. I'll have my knife and the wood axe to do what I can." Abraham slept only lightly at first. Even as he slept, he listened to the sounds of the forest, alert to hear the dragon approaching. The day gone by washed him with fatigue, and he dropped deeply into sleep.

In the morning, the sun rose and warmed the air. Quail scurried in the brush and called to each other.

Two dark-headed nuthatches came down a pine tree upside down and

chirped back and forth. Abraham heard them and opened his eyes to the early sunlight. He said, "It's morning, and we're still here."

He got up and walked a wide circle around the camp and came back to the horse. He said, "The dragon didn't come in the night."

He stood, lost in thought. Then he packed. When he was ready to go, Charger started downhill, and Abraham said, "Whoa. Wait up," and he led him back up the ridge.

They walked up through groves of mountain oak, where leaves grew to a darker green and shaded the trees toward rounded forms. Last year's leaves rotted to soil underfoot.

They left oak groves and pine trees behind them and climbed the steep ridge. Decomposed granite slipped under their feet. They picked their way through jumbles of rotting boulders and around clumps of blue flowers and red flowers pushing up through rock eroded to soil.

At the edge of the ridge, they stopped above steep cliffs of grey and black stone and looked down to white water in the canyon, along the curve of the canyon into the valley, where a thin white haze hung above trees, brush, and wide meadows. Sunlight reflected silver and gold from the great river far down in the floor of the valley.

Beyond the river, above the next mountain range, black clouds built a giant mountain high above the earthen mountains and rolled across the valley toward Abraham and his horse high on a ridge above the valley. Clouds shadowed the valley floor and sent winds of fog dancing before them. Wind smelled like rain and lightning and thunder.

Lightning flashed from advancing clouds and danced a brilliant dance to the ground, again, and again. Thunder rumbled, echoed up the canyons, and shook the mountain where they stood.

The dragon waited at the top of the narrow ridge. When Abraham turned and saw him above them in the rocks, he started and reached for the sword that was no longer there. He was chagrined at his reaction and yet not quit of his fear.

Darkness dropped on them as he led his horse up toward the dragon. Lightning flashed, lit grey stone, and danced in reflections in the dragon's eyes. Thunder shook the ground. Abraham stopped in front of the dragon. The first cold drops of rain drove a chill deep into him. Rain smelled coldly clean, raised the smell of granite dust, and then washed it from the air.

The dragon leaned down and said, "There's a cavern at the top of the ridge. It would be better to be there than here in the storm." He turned and climbed the ridge, and Abraham and Charger followed him.

Stones rolled under their feet; rain blew in the wind. Abraham could

barely see the dragon in dark rain ahead of him.

Lightning struck the mountain. Rock cracked and sizzled, and the ground shook.

Lightning blinded Abraham, and thunder deafened him. Wind slashed him with cold rain until his teeth chattered and his head filled with the storm. He kept going only because he thought he had to.

Abruptly, he walked out of the driving wind and rain but into even deeper darkness, so black, he turned from it and lost his direction. Out of darkness engulfing him, he created shapes and movements. He thought something formless moved toward him. He threw his arms up in front of his face, jerked his head back, and struck it painfully against stone. Bright colors flashed and turned in his eyes, and his legs went limp. He slid down the wall and sat down.

Flames burst from the darkness. He recoiled and then saw the dragon breathing fire over piled branches. The flame caught in them and crackled and burned. The dragon circled the fire and lay down on the other side.

Abraham stood up, rubbed his aching head, and gathered himself. He caught his horse's reins, brought him to the edge of firelight, unpacked him, and rubbed him down.

He sat down close to the fire. His cold, wet clothes clung to him. He stood up, took his clothes off, and spread them on rocks near the fire to dry. He wrapped his sleeping robe around himself, sat down, and leaned against a rock near the fire.

He spoke to the dragon. "Can you see in the dark? My horse can see in the dark better than I can. Sometimes, it was so dark, I couldn't see where to go, but my horse stayed on the path, and we traveled at night." Their depth inside the stone of the mountain muted the sounds of the storm.

Abraham wanted to look around and see what the cavern was like, but his weariness weighed him down, and he felt nearly unable to move. He said, "Did you know we were coming back?"

"Earlier in the afternoon, I saw you walk up the mountain out of the forest. I saw the storm blowing toward us across the valley, and I thought you might not find your way here."

"I was afraid of you again when I saw you there on the ridge."

The fire cast dancing patterns of light and shadow and reflected deep points of light from the dragon's eyes. Abraham felt nervous again. He wanted to keep the conversation going, but he couldn't think of what he should say. He said, "Did you ever see such a storm?"

"Oh yes. Many of them."

Abraham would have said good night or made further conversation, but exhaustion enfolded him, and he was asleep before he knew he was

going to sleep.

He dreamed: Black shadows spread moonlight over summer dirt. Moonlight fills reptilian eyes. The night is without motion and slows the blood.

The earth turns and centers the yellow moon in a dark sky.

A bird calls, two high-pitched notes from deep in the canyon; wind stirs high in the pines. Membrane wings flutter above dry grass. Something very large walks over the bare dirt of its own shadow.

Abraham didn't know where he was when he woke. Grey light suffused the stone cavern. He thought he was in his room at the castle, but he couldn't see the window, and the fireplace wasn't where it should be. When he thought of the fireplace, he knew he had gone to sleep near the fire. But it wasn't a camp on the trail. Then he realized he was at the end of the trail.

The fire had dried his clothes. He dressed and walked out of the cavern.

Early morning had come to the mountain. Rain had stopped. Scattered, dark clouds blew across the sky. Cold wind picked at him and hummed hollow across the face of the cavern in mountain stone.

He crossed smooth grey stone and drank from the spring that bubbled from the rock. Cold water washed away his soreness and tiredness and helped clear his mind of unfocused fear he had held without being quite aware of its existence.

Chapter 8: Abraham's Suggestion

Mountain spring days passed. At the top of the ridge, high above the cavern, black basalt intrusive dikes stood above eroding gray granite stone. On a clear morning, the dragon lay at the top of the ridge on dark rock and watched the moon set. The sky lightened for day. The eastern sky washed from grey to pale pink and then to gold. The last stars gave way to daylight.

The sun rose above eastern mountains, and the dragon soaked in its first warmth. As the day warmed, he stirred with restlessness.

Below him on the ridge, down among the jumbled boulders and azaleas and sparse jack pine, Abraham walked from the cavern to the spring. Water flowed from the cliff and splashed into the pool it had worn in basalt. Short, dense moss grew from stone above the water line. Long strands of fine, deep green moss undulated in water rushing from the pool and beginning the stream that formed the canyon below them.

Abraham left his clothes on the stone, stepped into the pool, sat down, and completely submerged himself. He leaped up and gasped and hooed and hawed at the icy chill of the water. He slapped his hands over himself in a hasty rub-down, plunged again, and leaped out, scrambled up the rock, numbed, his skin tight from the intense cold.

His brain felt numb. Disconnected thoughts circled and bumped like chunks of ice. Icy water had washed his eyes clean. He saw colors and motion and everything around him with fresh suddenness. Morning wind blew cold.

He ran in circles on the rock and warmed up, even in cold wind. He put on his clothes and walked down the mountain to green trees. New flowers grew close to the earth. He knelt and smelled them. Their sweet, colorful odors filled his consciousness and invigorated his day.

Charger cropped his breakfast from last year's grass down the ridge among the trees and drank below the spring.

Abraham walked down the mountain, cut willow saplings, and carried them to the cavern, where a shaft through stone brought in diffuse light. He stripped bark from the saplings, notched them, bent them, and bound them together with strips of bark. As days passed, he made a large chair with a high, curved back and arm rests. He made a low couch to sit or lie on. Some cold spring nights, they built a fire, stayed close to it, and talked the night through.

Nights grew shorter and warmer. Spring sun greened the mountain, brought leaves bursting open on branches of trees and bushes.

Abraham and the dragon traveled together around the highest part of the mountain, looked for newly sprouted plants, and noticed the growth of the older ones. Birds of a dozen species flew to the mountain for summer, and birds of a dozen more stopped to visit on their way farther north.

Grass grew. Flowers bloomed. More trees emerged from winter's dormancy. Moist earth came to life and sprouted more plants. Animals followed trails along the mountain. Springtime odors mingled with sunshine.

Abraham, the dragon, and the horse walked down steep ridges into the forest, down into canyons where streams grew to rushing spring white-water.

Abraham caught fish from the streams. The horse and the dragon grazed through lush grasses. They all slept some nights in the forest, returned often to the cliffs around the cavern, and basked in sunshine. They soaked warmth from stone as the sun set, stayed quiet and watched the moon and the stars.

One morning, after he had bathed, Abraham climbed steep rock to

where the dragon basked in sunshine. "I'd like to go someplace for a while. I'd like to see some different country."

The dragon sighed; a puff of flame and black smoke scorched rock in front of his nose. He said, "Of course you should go then."

"What I mean is, why don't we all go?"

The dragon blinked. He stood up and stretched. He flexed his leathery wings. He said, "I decided a long time ago it was dangerous to travel very far from here. There are more and more people now, and most of them won't tolerate dragons."

"I think we could do it if I went ahead and scouted out a safe way to go, where people wouldn't see us." The dragon lay down and thought about it. The man leaned against the rock and relaxed in sunshine. He heard the wind, the sounds of insects on the wind, the slow, steady sound of the dragon breathing, his own more rapid breathing. He dozed off. He woke when the dragon said,

"It's been a long time since I've been to the ocean. I'd like to go there once more."

Chapter 9: They Begin Their Journey Together

The next morning, the dragon, the horse, and the man started down the mountain. The man scouted the trails, and the horse and the dragon followed him down. They spent the first night sheltered below a sheer bluff and started again at daylight.

They traveled four days and emerged from the forest onto a sandy bank above the dirt-brown river. The dragon said, "I've always gone into the river here and floated to the ocean."

"We could build a raft. My horse and I could ride on the raft, and we could all float together. It would be easier than finding safe ways to go on land."

High water had left five good logs on the banks of the river. The dragon pulled them free of their driftwood tangles. They cut them and fastened them together into a raft. On the raft, the man built a small lean-to roof for shelter from the sun.

They tied the raft to the bank and pushed it into the water. Abraham said, "We're still up on the sand here. Let's push it out farther. That's good. Oh, fine. It's a fine raft. We just need to bring that side up a little and build a rudder."

The dragon started to say something, closed his mouth, and sank out of sight in the water. Abraham turned and saw two men on horses ride out of

the woods toward the river.

The first man was tall and slender, with a bushy red beard. Lighter colored hair fell to the shoulder of his tunic. The second man was shorter, darker, broad and powerfully built, with black hair and beard. They reined their horses up close to Abraham. The tall, red-bearded man said, "I am Richard, from the hill colony. This is Bogard, Thane of this river fief."

"And I am Abraham, from far up this same river."

"None who travel here are safe. There is a dragon about. We struck his track and followed it here."

Bogard dismounted. He walked up and down the river bank and studied the ground. "The dragon went into the river here." He faced Abraham. "Did you see it?"

Abraham studied his answer. Bogard asked him again, "Did you see the dragon? His tracks mix with yours and those of your horse. He went into the river right here."

"Yes. I saw him. You need have no fear. He is the most harmless beast in the forest."

"Harmless? A dragon? You are certainly an old fool if you believe that, more than a fool if you expect me to believe it."

Abraham reached for his sword before he remembered he no longer carried it. "You speak too readily when you know nothing. Insults can become a prelude to battle."

"I don't fight women nor old men. My time is more valuable to me than that."

Abraham restrained himself from pitching into the man, swordless as he was, only by the thought that he would not like to ruin their planned journey, and by the beginning of an idea that the dragon's refusal to fight might be based in good sense.

"I am Thane of this fief. You have built your raft from my trees, and I expect payment."

"These logs came down the river. The river's bounty is for whoever receives it."

"Old man, you tempt me to teach you respect. Right now, I have more important things to do than argue with you." He mounted his horse and rode to the woods.

Richard asked, "Do you know the dragon is not dangerous?"

"Yes."

"Don't include me in your distaste for Bogard. I don't like what he said to you. I owe him no allegiance. I am a free man. I only visit here."

Bogard rode back out of the forest and shouted, "Richard, I am going. Are you going with me?"

"I have unfinished business with Bogard. I hope I will meet you again." He turned his horse and galloped to catch up with Bogard.

Bogard and Richard galloped down the valley. They emerged from the forest into grassland, and the trail joined a road. Bogard slowed his horse, and Richard rode up beside him.

Bogard said, "That stimulated my thinking, but it tired my horse. Let's ride to the castle. What did you think of that old man by the river?"

"What is there to think? He was not afraid of you. Whether you wished it or not, I think you two would have been at sword-work, except he is recently unsworded. He had forgotten that and reached to draw before he remembered."

"Better for his life that he had no sword."

"You might underestimate him."

"You took a quick liking to the man."

"Yes."

"And I have been thinking he may be an honest man."

"When he said the dragon is harmless."

"Yes. But you see, that would mean he knows the dragon. It must mean they travel together. The mix of their tracks by the river says that's true."

They rode to the stables and left the horses with the groom. Bogard told the head man of the stables, "Saddle fresh horses for us, and another half-dozen. Harness teams to two of the freight wagons."

They walked into the castle, to Bogard's quarters. Bogard rang his bell and gave the servant orders to send several of his men to him. He gave two of them instructions to go up the riverbanks and look for tracks that would show the dragon had come out of the river.

"Louis, go quickly. Take the smith and workmen and build the weir into a dragon trap. Waste no time."

When he finished dispatching his men to their various duties, he turned again to Richard. "You see, he must be in the river. Why else would the old man build a raft? He has his horse."

"Quite an old horse. By his equipment, I would say he doesn't ride him."

"I may be proved wrong, but I believe the dragon comes down the river, and we can trap him at the weir."

"Bogard, what if he is harmless? Or, if he is not, why not be ready and fight if he offers harm? He might go peacefully through all this land. If there is any fight in him, you will surely find it if you attempt to trap him."

As they talked, Bogard gathered weapons and changed some of his clothing. "Quickly now. I think that raft is ready for the river, and we

haven't much time." They trotted down the steps, back to the stables, where the groom had horses ready for them.

"You see, Richard, after some thought, I'm not primarily concerned with the safety of my lands and people. Dragons have treasures, have they not? With a large enough treasure, this fief could become a kingdom."

They mounted horses and galloped to the river, where a dozen workmen reinforced and modified the weir. "Bogard, I want no part of this. I am leaving you to your designs here."

Richard started to ride away, but Bogard motioned, and three men stopped him and held him at bay with pikestaffs.

"Richard, my apologies. I wouldn't have brought you to the river had I known you wouldn't join with me. Now, I can't let you ride away. How am I to know you won't ride up the river and give the alarm?

"You are a free man, but you ride my horse. Leave him here. Walk to the castle for your own horse. These two will ride along to make sure you are not harmed along the way."

Chapter 10: Captured

Afternoon sun reflected from the river's surface. Abraham moved his gear onto the raft and sat down in shade from the roof. The dragon lifted his head above the surface on the river side of the raft.

"I doubt we've seen the last of them. I could swim off deep any time, and no one would see me in this muddy water, so I wasn't in danger, but you were."

"We had best make speed. I would be through this Bogard's fief and on down the river." It took them several hours to build the rudder and its support and to fasten it to the raft. Then they took the current.

The dragon swam far ahead of the raft. He explored the broad river, bank to bank and top to bottom. The freedom of movement, the buoyancy, fired him with enthusiasm and filled him with joy. He frolicked in the deep river like a young dragon.

He visited with a large and ancient sturgeon who swam deep in the river. "I knew your grandfather's grandfather when I swam in this river every spring."

The sturgeon didn't like abruptly-begun conversation, and the dragon felt a little hurried about going on down the river. "Another time, when there is more time, I would visit with you."

On the raft, Abraham stood at the rudder. It looked to him as if the raft stood still, and the riverbanks, the trees on the banks, and the sky above

flowed rapidly by. He had to remind himself to look back to the river often to avoid snags that pushed up into the surface current. The raft danced ponderously on surface currents, and the man and the horse moved in a riverine rhythm to stand above it.

Deer drank from the river and watched the raft pass. A kingfisher flashed brilliant green in clear sunshine and dove into the water. A great blue heron on tall, thin legs browsed the shallows. Pipers ran along the shore. Fish eagles sunned in high branches above the river bank.

The horse didn't enjoy traveling by raft, because he couldn't move around; sun and sun reflected from water was too hot and bright, and the raft and the river grew no grass to graze, but he stood, and he was patient.

Sunlight dimmed and then disappeared as clouds swept across the river valley. Wind bent trees along the river and whipped the water. Hard rain blew in the wind and frothed the river's surface.

Bogard's men worked rapidly as wind blew and rain poured from dark clouds. They finished their work on the weir and hid in brush above the river banks.

Richard walked rapidly toward the castle as the day darkened and rain blew in hard wind. Two horsemen flanked him closely. Thunder rolled across the valley. When he reached the castle, he walked to the stable and led his horse from its stall.

Bogard's men reined their horses around and blocked Richard's way out. Richard turned his horse back into the stall and looped his reins to keep him there. Quicker than thought, he stepped across and opened the stall where a stallion kicked and whinnied, excited by the activity and frightened by the thunder.

Richard yelled, and the stallion reared and bolted for the door. Richard lashed him across the rump and yelled again, and the stallion charged from the stable.

Trained for battle, the big stallion reared and struck with his front hooves when the men on horses tried to stop him. He knocked one horse down and sent his rider rolling. He galloped for the gate while the other horse reared and pawed at the air.

The rider tried to bring his horse down and turn him toward Richard, who advanced with the pointed bull goad he had taken from its place on the wall.

Richard jabbed the horse, and the horse spun, reared, and retreated. The rider struggled to stay mounted. Richard hit him with the pole and unhorsed him.

The man started to stand, and Richard hit him with the handle of the goad and knocked him down. Richard brought out his horse, mounted

without saddling, and galloped toward the river.

The dragon had little thought for danger deep in the river, and he couldn't see very far in muddy water. He thought he tangled into a submerged tree, with vines playing into the current. He backed, struggled toward the surface, pulled one way and then another.

It took him a moment to realize he was severely tangled. He stopped, gathered his strength, burst toward the surface, broke ropes, and uprooted anchors. He twisted into the weir, and two extensions from it closed in behind him.

He fought, pulled, lashed out, bit and clawed at his bindings. The river, whipped by rain and wind, frothed and foamed with his struggle. He raised his head and neck above the water. He tried to breathe flame on his bindings, but he had swallowed a lot of water, and his fuel was soaked. He thrashed about with tail and claws, trying to pull away, but the more he struggled, the more he entangled himself.

A boat emerged from low brush hanging over the river. Two men pulled rapidly on oars across the river. Bogard and another man stood at the bow of the boat and threw ropes around every part of the dragon that came above the surface, tangling him tighter and tighter.

"Ware the raft," Bogard shouted, for the raft swept into view around the curve in the river.

Abraham saw the men and the dragon struggling at the weir, and he steered his raft toward the boat. The oarsmen tried to back and turn, but they tangled in their own ropes. They slashed about with their knives, trying to cut the boat free.

Abraham shouted, "Jump for your lives," and the oarsmen jumped overboard, but Bogard and the other man drew their swords and leaped for the raft as it crashed into the boat and shattered it to pieces.

Abraham jerked the short pole that controlled the rudder from its socket, swung it, struck the first man in mid-air, changed his course, and plunged him into the river.

Abraham spun about, placed the pole against Bogard's chest before he had his balance solidly enough to parry, pushed, and Bogard fell backward into the river, leaving his sword spinning in the air, and Abraham caught it. "Thank you, Bogard. I'm without a sword, as I'm sure you've noticed."

The raft stopped against the weir beside the dragon. Abraham lay about with the sword, cutting ropes with every stroke.

Richard galloped onto the river bank. He swung the pole he still carried and knocked one armed man into the river, leaped his horse far out over the river, heaved his pole just before horse and rider hit the water with a tremendous splash, and the pole stoved through the boat starting out

toward the battle in the river. Water spouted up through the bottom of the boat, and the rowers turned toward shore and rowed hard.

Horse and rider swam out into the river. "Abraham, I've come to help." Richard pulled himself up onto the raft and slapped his horse on the rump. "Swim for the shore."

Abraham pushed his own horse. "Swim for it. We might all drown out here." Charger jumped into the river and swam for the shore.

Bogard and his men pulled themselves from the river onto the weir a ways from the raft. Abraham and Richard cut ropes that bound the dragon as fast as they could move. Richard said, "They've released the end of the weir."

The raft, the dragon and all swung down the river. Held fast to one shore, the weir let them slip downriver a ways, then swung them in an arc to the shore, where a half dozen of Bogard's men waited until the raft touched the bank, and the men boarded all at once. Richard and Abraham fought side by side, but there were too many. Richard turned toward one, and another struck him from behind and knocked him down and senseless. Two swordsmen working together disarmed Abraham and overpowered him. More men boarded the raft, bound Richard and Abraham, and wound the dragon with more ropes.

Two teamsters brought horses, and they began to pull the dragon from the river, binding him further as he emerged from the water.

They finished. Abraham, Richard, and the dragon lay bound on the high bank above the river. Bogard and his men rested and wrung out their clothes. Wind slackened. Thunder rolled away from them down the valley. Heavy rain still fell on all of them.

Richard regained consciousness and looked about. Bogard approached Abraham. "We can have it done with quickly and you can go free if you tell me where the dragon's treasure is."

"Treasure? You did this for treasure? You have fooled yourself. He has no treasure."

"Bring down the wagons. Load them up and take them to the dungeon. This old man's memory may improve with a little time there. Richard, you'll get to see part of my castle you've never seen before."

Loading the dragon was a hard chore. The men slipped around in mud and grumbled at the dragon's great weight, but working together, they raised him from the mud-slick ground, pushed him onto the heavy wagon, and tied him down.

Rain stopped. Clouds rolled away, and the sun shone brightly. Steaming mist rose around them as men, horses, and loaded wagons traveled the muddy road to the castle.

They locked Abraham, the dragon, and Richard, still bound, in the dungeon.

Bogard brought a boy about ten years old to the door. "This is the general. We will leave him here by the door, and when you are ready to talk, send him up to me." The boy peered at them. Then they shut and barred the door.

After quite some time had passed, Richard said, "I make no progress. They have bound me well."

"And me."

They had bound the dragon even about the jaws, and he could do or say nothing at all.

Richard asked, "Is it true there is no treasure?"

Abraham said, "Yes. He owns nothing but his life."

"If Bogard would believe that, he might release us."

"After all the effort he put into capturing us, I don't think he's going to give up that easily."

Several hours later, two men came down, unbound Richard, and escorted him up from the dungeon.

Bogard received Richard in his quarters. "Sit down. Sit down, Richard. I have roast fowl for you, and a little wine.

"Now Richard, I understand your actions today. I've always known you to be impetuous and fierce in your defense of what you believe is right. However, to plunge in on the side of the dragon shows poor judgement. Very dangerous, very devious creatures, dragons are."

"I believe what Abraham says, that he is harmless. What's more, you undertook his capture, not because you think he's dangerous, but because you hope for treasure."

"I won't argue that. I told you as much on the trail earlier today. Then Richard, work with me to find the treasure, and I will share it with you."

"Bogard, I believe Abraham when he says there is no treasure."

"You are easily taken in."

"I believe Abraham is an honest man, and he speaks the truth about the dragon."

"Well Richard, you could be right. I've thought of that. He might be telling the truth, as far as he knows it.

"But the dragon might have a treasure, and the old man doesn't know it. Or the old man might lie. I sent my trackers to follow their trail back, but the rain has washed it away.

"You've put me in a ticklish position, Richard. You are my friend, and yet I can't give you your freedom. You've shown our friendship means less to you than trying to help the dragon and the old man. However, if you

will work with me, I will reward you so well, your time imprisoned will mean nothing."

"I've told you what I know."

"If we could find out where his lair is, we could go there and search. If there is no treasure, and if the dragon is indeed harmless, I would release all of you to go your ways."

"I don't know where it is. I'm not interested in finding out."

"I see. Richard, if you change your mind, if you find information that would be useful to me, send word by Aaron, the boy who tends the dungeon. He is a simple-minded lad, but he can carry a message. You've eaten nothing of what you were served."

"Send food to all of us in the dungeon, and I will eat."

"Yes. Good thought. What does the dragon eat?"

"I don't know."

"Send word. We're out of maidens in the pantry, but we might be able to scramble up something else."

Chapter 11: Deep in the Dungeon

Deep in the dungeon, Aaron slipped into the cell with the dragon and Abraham. He studied the dragon. Then he turned to Abraham. "I am Aaron, keeper of the dungeon and general sweep."

Abraham asked, "Whose child are you among these men?"

"None among these men. Bogard invaded our lands. His men killed my mother and father. They captured me and brought me here. I have my freedom within the dungeon, but I am never allowed out."

"Would you escape if you could?"

"Oh yes. I will escape. I grow, and I build my strength. When I am strong enough, I will kill all the men in the castle, loose all the prisoners, and I will be free."

"Perhaps we can combine forces. I'm surprised they let you in where you might help us."

"They think I am dimwitted and cowed in spirit. When I began to recover, I could have communicated and showed them some intelligence, but I didn't. I saw what they thought of me, and I've played the part because it makes them confident in me.

"They are bringing the other man back." He placed his finger on his lips, slipped out the door, and quietly placed the bar. He looked through the tiny, barred window, and it seemed to Abraham that he looked at a different face entirely, slack-jawed and blank-eyed. Aaron giggled, a

hollow, mindless sound, and left.

Bogard and two of his men came into the cell. Bogard unbound Abraham, while his men stood with swords ready. Bogard said, "Tell me what you know about this dragon."

"He has no treasure nor any belongings, because he needs nothing. He is an intelligent creature, careful to bring harm to no one."

"Where is his lair?"

"Ask these questions of the dragon."

"His jaws are bound."

"Unbind them."

"So he can use his fire and teeth on us?"

Abraham said, "He won't. He could have killed you at the weir, when you were still in the boat, but he would not. I would that he had, and you would not have taken us."

"Come this way. Into this cell with Richard." Bogard pushed him into Richard's cell, shut and locked the door, and left.

The day went, and the night. They had no food, no water.

In the morning of the second day, Aaron slipped into the cell. He put a jar of water and half a loaf of bread on the bench. "Drink. I want the jar."

They shared the water, and he took the jar. "This is not sent. I brought it to you. Leave no crumbs." He went out, and they shared the bread.

Aaron came in again when they were finished. "I do not trust this man, Richard. He is a friend to Bogard. However, since he knows the secret that is most dangerous to me, I will tell him another. Of the stone mountain this castle is built into, and of wood from the castle, I have fashioned a pike, sharper than a dragon's tooth.

"If you betray us, I will kill you quicker than you can think of it. I would like it better if you were somewhere else, but we can't wait to see if they separate you.

"Bogard isn't sure what to do. He thinks to believe you that there is no treasure, but he has started other plans. He would starve you into telling him anything you haven't.

"He thinks necromancers would value dragon parts highly. He has sent messengers. He fears the dragon, but he doesn't want to kill him yet. His blood and flesh might spoil and be useless.

"He thinks you might tell the truth, when you say the dragon is harmless, so he thinks to loose his jaws to eat. Yet he may not be harmless with his teeth and fire freed. Yet he probably can breathe fire from his nostrils, and he hasn't, so either he hasn't any fire, or he has it but won't use if for a weapon.

"Bogard still hopes Richard will bring him useful information. Perhaps

he is among us for just that reason."

Richard said, "What I know, I've told him. I would not join him against the dragon, Abraham, or you for fortune, freedom, or my life."

"You might have a chance to prove that. They will change guards soon, and they will probably confer again. I'm going to see if I can learn more about their plans."

Abraham said, "Find out what happened when they took us at the river. When you know that, you'll know you can trust Richard."

Aaron left. Late that day, he brought them bread, water, and a small piece of cheese and slipped away without conversation.

The next day, Bogard walked down into the dungeon with his guards. "What does the dragon eat?"

"If you intend him to eat, you will have to free his jaws. Why not free them and ask him what he eats?"

"If you don't tell me what he eats, he can stay bound and go hungry."

"One thing I'm sure he eats is grass, like a horse."

"Grass, like a horse. We'll bring hay. If you want something to eat, give me a map to the dragon's lair."

"Then it seems I must go hungry."

Aaron brought a bundle of hay into the dragon's cell. "Here I am. If you fight, kill, or eat people, it will have to be me. They won't come into the dungeon now. If they lose me to a dragon, they think it is a small loss."

He untied the ropes, unbound the dragon's jaws, and stepped back. The dragon studied the boy.

"Can you breathe fire then?"

"My fire was doused in the river. I need fire to start it again."

"Abraham said you could have breathed fire at first, or that you could have killed some of them with tooth and claw. Why didn't you?"

"That would have seemed simpler, wouldn't it?"

"Why didn't you?"

"If I had done that, where would you be?"

"Right here, just as I am now."

"And next week, where would you be?"

"Here, still. I think I can get these chains off. If I free you and bring you flame, you can kill all the men in the castle, and we will be free."

The dragon shook his head.

"Then it's true, what Abraham says, that you will not fight to defend your own life."

"I am not so fond of my physical body that I would destroy my part in eternity for its preservation."

"We are fond of our physical bodies."

"I know."

"Why would we believe there is anything else?"

"You needn't."

"You are selfish and a coward."

"As you wish."

"The men of this castle are murderers."

"Would the world be better if we were murderers too?"

"Why do you have fire and sharp teeth and claws and such great strength, if these are not weapons to defend yourself, if these are not weapons for battle?"

"Badgers don't have their sharp teeth, powerful bodies and claws for battle."

"They don't? Then what for?"

"To dig their shelter, to get their food. Even the badger is not quite the fighter men claim him to be. He would rather bluff and back away and save his strength and his tools for the work of getting food and shelter."

"But he will fight. If he can't back away, he will fight and do it well."

"Yes. He is a badger. I am a dragon. One particular dragon."

"But how do you use such powerful tools for shelter and food?"

"Dig through rock. Melt ore and eat it. Eat rock."

"Could you dig through these rock walls? and the rock outside them?"

"Yes."

"The walls are reinforced with iron bars."

"Rekindled, I can melt them."

"If I can get you free of this chain and rope and bring you fire, will you free us from this castle?"

"I think I can do that. I will try."

Aaron slipped out of the cell. He came back with a torch and gave it to the dragon, who swallowed it, fire and all, and lay quietly.

After a moment, Aaron said, "Aren't you going to do anything?"

"Yes. It takes a while."

"Eat the hay. It's dry. It might help."

"Quite right." The dragon swallowed the hay. After a moment, he snorted puffs of smoke. Then more smoke. Then flame.

Aaron worked steadily with his hands and the dragon with his teeth and flames, until chains and ropes lay all about, and the dragon was free. He stretched. Then he examined the wall between the cells.

He pushed one long, sharp claw into a small opening between stones, pried, pushed, and pulled until he pulled one stone toward him a little, then a little more, and the square stone protruded from the wall. He gripped two sides of the stone and pulled it slowly toward him and rocked it side to

side and up and down as he pulled it.

The stone scraped against stones surrounding it, and the dragon stopped, listened, and waited, then started again.

He pulled the stone free of the wall and set it down on the floor. He pulled more stones from the wall, moving faster, because he had the open space where the first stone had been to pull the next stones into.

When the opening between the cells was large enough, Richard and Abraham walked into the dragon's cell. Aaron breathed deep, steady breaths to keep his excitement from making him too loud or careless. He concentrated very hard to have everything work right. He knew they could lose everything they had gained, and he didn't want that to happen.

He said, "Here are what weapons we have." Aaron gave Richard a kitchen knife, well sharpened. To Abraham, he gave a firewood axe. For himself, he kept a long wooden staff, with a jagged sliver of shattered stone affixed as a deadly point.

The dragon dug through the dungeon wall and began to dig into the stone behind the wall.

Aaron went up into the main part of the castle and told Bogard that the dragon could breathe fire.

Bogard asked, "So what is the dragon doing now?"

"Nothing. Sitting there looking at the smoke he breathes."

"Yes. I think there is nothing to do now but wait. In a few days, my messengers will return, and I think they will bring treasure from necromancers who will buy the dragon's blood and flesh. We will probably have you kill the dragon. Are you a dragon slayer, boy? Do you think you are brave enough and strong enough to kill the dragon?"

Aaron flexed his arms, roared, and danced for Bogard.

Bogard laughed and said, "You'll do. I want you to take food to the prisoners. Richard's friends and followers can put together a powerful force if they need to. Some of his friends came to see if they could find him after his horse returned home without him. It would be well to not use him too roughly until we are sure of our position. When I have the treasure and the mercenaries I can hire with it, I will be ready for Richard's hill colony, ready to turn this fief into a kingdom, but the time is not quite yet. What do you think, boy, am I right? Ha. You don't think at all, do you, you idiot fool?"

Bogard laughed, and Aaron laughed with him and danced around the room again. He imagined how it would feel to cut Bogard's throat, to watch him die as the realization came into his extinguishing thoughts that this boy was no fool, had played his role well until the time was right. Aaron would bring Bogard's coarse and stupid laughter to an abrupt end,

and he wanted to do it now. He wanted to end this true fool's loud and stupid laughter, but it was as Bogard said, the time was not quite yet, and until the time was upon them, he must still play the fool, dance on the cold stone floor, laugh like an idiot, wait for the moment. He waited and then retreated from the room.

Bogard waited impatiently for his messengers to return and bring him offers for dragon's blood and parts and information on how to prepare a dragon's carcass for market.

Aaron returned to the dungeon. The dragon kept digging. Aaron, Richard and Abraham moved rock out of the way until the two cells were nearly full. The third day of digging, Aaron came with the news that messengers had returned, with buyers and mercenary men at arms Bogard had sent for.

The dragon dug upward and pushed open a small piece of the surface. Bright sunlight spilled into the tunnel. Aaron scrambled up and looked out, then slid back down.

"We're next to the road. There are people on the road, going into the castle. We'll have to wait for night."

Aaron went up out of the dungeon and came back with a sword. "They've given me this to kill the dragon. They're waiting at the dungeon door.

"Bogard is no longer afraid to battle any forces that might come against him. He has sixty mercenaries to add to his own forces, so it's the end of Richard. You Abraham, he intends to torture to see if there might yet be a treasure where the dragon lives."

He gave the sword to Richard. "If we need it to win free, you will do better with it than I, but I want it back when we are free. They won't wait long for me to be about this job of killing you, dragon. I think we should go up the tunnel.

"Breathe fire into the dungeon and heat it up quite hot. That is not attacking anyone, since there isn't anyone in the dungeon. They'll have to wait hours, maybe all night, without knowing what has happened. We'll be well away before they discover we've gone."

The dragon puffed out great, roaring yellow and orange flame that dried out the dank dungeon and began to heat it up. He puffed and snorted and built flames of hotter blue that roared and whistled and filled the dungeon. Iron melted. Rock cracked and sizzled and ran molten.

Abraham and Richard and Aaron sheltered from the heat behind rocks built up in front of the entrance to their tunnel. Still, even where they were heated up hotter and hotter. They moved up the tunnel and sweated and waited.

Then it was night. They climbed up the tunnel and out into the free world and sealed the tunnel shut behind them.

The dragon said, "No one will be able to tell your tracks from all the other tracks on the road, but a dragon's tracks would definitely be out of place." He spread his huge wings, flew ahead, circled, and landed on a rock formation near the road. From there, he flew far ahead of the humans, landed, and waited on the ridge beyond the valley.

At dawn, Abraham, the dragon, Richard, and Aaron stood where the road took the top of the high ridge. The dragon said, "I can't keep flying. It wears me out and makes me too visible. I'll fly to the river and float to the ocean. Abraham, if you would still go to the ocean, I will meet you there." He flew from the ridge, glided above trees, banked sharply, and splashed into the river. Spreading, concentric circles hurried down the river's currents from where the dragon sank beneath the surface.

Aaron said, "Now that everyone is safely away, I'll go back to the castle and kill all of them I can."

Richard said, "It would be a waste of your young life. You aren't trained for battle. You're half the size of Bogard's smallest soldier.

"Bogard has defeated himself. Let his power crumble around him. He has contracted for mercenaries, and he has nothing to pay them. Necromancers have traveled for weeks, and the prize Bogard promised them floats with river currents to the ocean. Necromancers and mercenaries will exact their payment. Bogard might have difficulty being a further threat to anyone.

"I'm going to the hill colony. I think any battle that comes to Bogard will stay in this fief, but I will bring our forces together in case it spills over from here.

"Go with me, Aaron. We will make a home and a place of honor for you in the hill colony. If you wish to be a warrior, we will teach you the art of battle. There is much to learn, and there are choices you haven't even imagined. There is more honor, fair play, and love among men than you might think, and the hill colony is a good place to see it and become part of it."

Aaron looked wistfully at the sword he had taken back from Richard. He looked down the valley toward the castle. Tears filled his eyes and overflowed, and he turned his back to them that they might not see.

After a long time, he turned and handed the sword to Richard. "Teach me to use it well. Teach me also what other ways there are besides the way of the sword and the warrior."

Aaron, Richard, and Abraham journeyed on to the hill colony. Abraham's horse had followed Richard's horse home, and the people of the

hill colony took care of him. The colony organized for defense and stationed warriors along the border, but it was as Richard predicted. The strife stayed within the river fief.

Bogard tried to convince the mercenaries they should join him, pursue and catch the dragon, then help expand his lands. Their payment would be delayed, but they would be rich in the end.

The mercenaries wanted none of it, but immediate payment, as promised.

Bogard overpowered one necromancer and stole the treasure he had brought to pay for dragon parts, but the others called up dark powers, destroyed part of the castle, and set most of Bogard's surviving men to flight. The mercenaries sacked the rest of the castle for anything of value and left.

Some said Bogard had been killed. Some thought he had retreated into the forest with a few of his men. The castle stood in ruin, deserted.

Chapter 12: Alone, Abraham Resumes His Journey

Abraham, Richard, and Aaron stood together on the ridge above the hill colony.

Richard said, "Your horse is content here. The meadows are rich, and he has the company of other horses. It’s a good place for him to retire."

"He wants to stay. I think he's had enough of adventure."

"Take one of my horses. You could make good use of one. If ever he’s in your way, send him off, and he'll come back here."

"Thank you, Richard, but I’ll travel by my feet now. Most of what I have is where the dragon lives, and I can carry what I need myself. Richard, Aaron, God be with you."

He walked away from them, down the ridge toward the ocean.

Richard said, "I think we won't see him again."

Aaron said, "When I am a man, I will try to find where the dragon lives. I will go in peace, and I think I will find it. If Abraham lives then, I will see him again."

Richard and Aaron walked together back to the village.

Chapter 13: Again, Their Journeys Merge

Abraham walked along the ridge above the river.

Small, twisted white oak trees and grass and brush and flowers spread

out over a thinly-soiled lava flow. Summer settled hot on the land. Shallow-rooted plants seeded and dried to yellows, browns, and dull reds as hot sunshine dried out the soil. The air smelled of dust and dry plants and heat. Heat penetrated to Abraham's bones.

Through the hottest part of the afternoon, he rested in shade under trees or in shade cast by stone bluffs jutting sharply out from the ridge above him. He slept a light sleep of hot afternoons and dreamed of new days dawning in crisp coolness before the heat of the day began.

The sun dropped below the western horizon, and Abraham started again. He walked through clear light in late afternoon after sunset. He walked through dusk, when everything around him suggested magical, mysterious shapes in fading light and the smells of the earth began to take on a hint of moisture.

All the day's light faded. He traveled part of the night by faint light from the stars in the sky, by sudden light from the rising moon. Sometime in the night, he felt tired, lay down on the ground, and slept until morning's first light turned the deep sky bright grey.

Abraham was sure he would see the dragon again, but he didn't think about it much. He looked at the world around him and didn't hurry.

Daylight spread grey to purple to full light. Darkness settled slowly onto the world.

Deer and elk grazed the valley in small groups. Shaggy grey, yellow, and russet coyotes that contained the summer and the universe studied Abraham, and then they disappeared like shadows disappearing into grey light of dusk.

The ridge dropped and blended to the smoother valley floor. Abraham walked a steady pace down the valley. The land changed again to deeper soil. White oak gave way to dense growths of black oak, where summer heat intruded slowly into deep shade. Moss hung green from massive black-oak limbs. Abraham walked quietly through that dense forest, as if something slept there, and he would not wake it.

The valley turned toward the ocean. Mornings and evenings were cool. Dozens of kinds of trees grew toward the sky. Dense brush filled drainages. Low hills spread down into the valley from the steep, mountain range. Abraham smelled mud, water, green plants, moist smells mingled with the smells of summer-dry land. Then he smelled the ocean and he heard it when the breezes blew toward him from the surf, and at last, he saw the vast water before him and heard the surf break on black rocks and on beaches of sand. The river spread a great delta of silt and flowed into the ocean. Muddy water reached into clear green water in patterns of dispersing currents.

Abraham walked south on ocean beaches until cliffs rose straight up from the breaking sea. He climbed above cliffs into rolling hills. Eagles and vultures took the skies. Smaller birds flew closer to the ground. Grass still grew green and lush, though middays were hot.

The dragon swam deep in the deep green sea. He swam up to the surface and rolled in the waves.

Where the currents ran north, he met grey whales. They grouped up around the young, and the largest whales stayed between him and the rest of the pod. But his intentions were peaceful, and they began to visit together. Huge creature swam by huge creature in friendship. They spoke together of the sea and life in the sea.

Grey whales swim halfway around the world for the changing seasons. The dragon bid them farewell and took his leisurely way back to the coast.

He dozed in sunshine on the surface of the rolling sea and woke to see a ship bearing down upon him under white and red sails. He swam beside the ship in the wind. Sailors gathered at the rail and watched him. They made no move to get closer, no move to flee. They had lived long at sea, and they knew there was much of the universe they did not understand but could allow to be.

High on the hills in hot sunshine, Abraham stood and watched the ocean. He watched the ship sailing south until it dropped from sight behind the earth's curve. Then he walked again.

Wind, sharp with the smell of the sea, bent tall grass in rippling currents of deep green and whispered and sang all around Abraham. The land fell to the broad beach of a small cove. Five brown pelicans flew up the coast at dusk.

Abraham camped near the stream that night. The ocean shook the ground on which he slept and came strongly into his dreams again. He sensed the ocean's power he had dreamed before, but he felt deeply at peace now with it and with those who lived in it.

In the early morning, the dragon walked up out of the ocean, across the beach, and up into the hills, and the man joined the dragon in the hills above the ocean. Together, they traveled south beside the ocean.

They journeyed inland to see what was there and then returned to the ocean.

Far south, they turned and walked north again. They traveled a long route inland, back to the sea, and inland again, for there were many different forms of land to explore and many forms of life on land and in the sea.

They explored a rain forest and learned about some of the life there. They traveled through sand dunes closer to the ocean. They lay in the sun

and swam in the ocean and in streams flowing to the ocean.

They traveled long distances some days and not at all other days. They walked where curiosity took them or followed their feet down the lay of the land. The days began to shorten, and summer was full. The dragon and the man were sleek and at ease with the good health the bounty of summer on the good land brought them.

The sun descended into the southern sky. Fall touched the land and brought them their first sense of urgency.

The dragon said, "Winter will close the Red Mountain. I would journey home while there is still time to take a leisurely pace."

"I would go with you if I am welcome in your home."

"You are."

The dragon and the man stood high on the bluffs and looked at the ocean a last time. Then they turned and started back toward the mountains.

Men settle mostly in valleys and along rivers. Abraham and the dragon traveled on ridges and took their water from small streams long before the streams joined the river.

As they started up into the foothills, oak leaves turned red and yellow and orange. Aspen leaves turned yellow, and dogwood leaves turned fiery red. A hundred kinds of trees and bushes showed a thousand colors. The nights turned cold.

In the late fall of the year, they drank again of the icy water from the spring near the cavern. Evenings and nights had turned very cold. Heavy frost covered the ground in the mornings. Dirt froze and pushed up in complex crystal forms like castles that melted to mud when the sun struck them.

Middays, Abraham bathed where the water pooled in grey stone beneath the cliff.

Dark thunderclouds piled above the mountains. Hail and sleet blew against the mountain. When the storms blew away, the man and the dragon left the cavern and looked at the land. Clouds, wind, rain, hail and sleet grew stronger.

They stayed in the cavern most of the time. Abraham played soft, liquid melodies on his flutes. He sat quietly and thought thoughts beyond words, thoughts of his new awareness, since he had come to the mountain. Sometimes he went to the mouth of the cavern and watched snow fall. Wind picked snow from the ground and drove it in sharp angles.

Abraham made snowshoes of limbs and bark and hiked out from the cavern between storms. It was so cold, his breath froze. He wrapped his face with scarves against the cold. Ice froze in the scarves and in his beard. Even when he dressed heavily, he could not stay out long.

The water in the spring froze next to the stone. Green strands of moss froze in their waving motion in the current. A flow of water persisted under the ice and started down toward the valley.

The dragon and the man came closer together in their ways of living. The man would not have said he hibernated, and yet sometimes he woke and thought he had slept many days, perhaps weeks. He looked out from the mouth of the cavern and saw new drifts of snow. The lay of the surface had changed in ways that could only have been done over many days of hard storm.

And the dragon did not sleep so deeply nor so long as he usually did. He did not hibernate straight through the winter.

Sometimes, when Abraham went out, the dragon woke and went out with him. Abraham carved wooden masks to fit their upper faces, with narrow slits to look through, so they would not suffer blindness from the intense glare of sun on snow.

The dragon found places where the wind had blown rocks clear of snow. He curled there in the sun and reflected sun. Even in winter cold, he gathered some warmth.

Sometimes, they took wood from the stores and built a fire in the cavern. The dragon listened to the gentle flute music the man played.

The dragon curled close to the fire and told Abraham of times beyond human knowledge, of dragon ways. He sang a dragon music so strange Abraham could not hear it only with his ears but learned to listen with his total existence. He began to understand the dragon's ancient memories. Sometimes he played a high, thin melody on his small flute that went well with the dragon's puffing, fire-breathing, whistling, humming, keening, tail-thumping music.

Springtime and summertime came again, with a time of warmth to explore the land, a time for being free.

The dragon asked, "Are you going back?"

The man said, "Someday we will be free to go where we want, because men will overcome their fear. Until then, these mountains and the wilderness we find free are a larger world than I've known before. I'm pleased to stay here."

Winter enfolded the Red Mountain again, and the Red Mountain enfolded them as they lived deep in winter and dreamed and sang and played the slow beginning of a new time of peace in the universe.

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