

# Chapter 1 – In Through the Door

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Are you sure you want to hear this? I know we're probably not going anywhere anytime soon, but are you sure? Well, okay. But be sure to let me know when you get tired of this. I'm not sure where to start. I've always been a strong introvert, that and the fact that I spent my info tech career planted in front of a computer is probably why I never married. That's not part of the story, but it kind of explains how I ended up in Colorado instead of wasting away at home. You see, I received a double whammy not long ago. First, I got laid off. That's not unusual for the IT world, but for an almost 50-year-old man it's not a good thing, especially when companies are looking for young people who can work on the bleeding edge of technology. Not long after I was walked out the door I went to the doctor because of severe stomach and lower back pains. I figured it was an ulcer, you know, from the stress due to the unsuccessful six-month job search. Nope, cancer. Not only that but it had metastasized, if that's the right word, and even with chemo and radiation therapy, which I couldn't really afford, the doctors didn't give me much hope. They said I had maybe four months. And I knew that the last month or so would be pretty miserable. I sure as hell didn't want to go out that way.

That's what got me up to Colorado. I love camping and went out whenever I could get time off. I always wanted to camp in the mountains outside of Durango and Silverton. I thought I might as well give it a shot now, because I wouldn't get to later. I found myself in one of those touristy outdoor shops, looking at a stand of walking sticks. My knee had been acting up, the one I hurt playing softball, so I thought I would I would get a stick to help with the hiking. Well, while standing there I had another episode of excruciating pain, the one that makes you want to crawl into a hole someplace and just scream. I didn't, scream that is, but my body had almost locked up thanks to the spasms. I was about back to normal when I sensed someone standing behind me.

“You all right?” It was the shopkeeper.

“Yes, just a little back spasm.” I didn't feel like burdening him with my problems.

“So,” the shopkeeper said, “you planning on a hike up into the mountains?”

“That’s the idea. Want to try to get off the beaten path, so to speak.” I took my hand off the walking stick I had used to keep me from falling over. “How'd you know?”

The shopkeeper laughed. “Well, you ain't exactly dressed like a tourist. You're by yourself with no wife or kids running around, and you're looking at walking sticks. And you don't exactly look like a train buff.”

I laughed. “Good guess, Sherlock. Yeah, always wanted to come up here and do some backpacking. I remember when my parents told me we were coming up to ride the train to Silverton. My brother was

thrilled but I really didn't care. But it turned out pretty cool, what with that giant steam engine belching black smoke and blowing steam all over everything. The ride was neat, surrounded by nature and all. What I thought was really cool was meeting some backpackers who were going to ride the train up into the mountains and then hop off along the way. When we got back I joined a local Boy Scout troop so I could go camping. I guess I've been camping or backpacking ever since.”

I turned to look at the walking sticks. There were not quite a dozen, if I remember correctly. All metal, except two or three, and those looked more like painted wooden dowels than walking sticks.

“So how long to going to up there for? Spend the night? Or longer?”

“Actually don't really know. I have enough dehydrated meals for a week and a half, maybe more if I stretch it.” I didn't tell him that this was my last camping 'hurrah.'

“Wow,” he said, “must be nice to be able to take time off to go do that.”

“Well, yeah, that's not a problem anymore. I got 'retired' half a year ago. Guess they wanted someone younger and more aggressive.” I shrugged my shoulders, “who knows.”

I saw that he was a little embarrassed. “Oh man, sorry to hear that.”

“That's okay. Not much I can do about it. I decided to come up here, commune with nature for a bit, and try to de-stress.” I didn't tell him that I was planning to spend my last days up there and not come back.

“I was looking for something to help me walk up the slopes. I have a slight knee problem thanks to a line drive. It gives me trouble every once in a while.”

“Well, those are sturdy walking sticks. Granted, they don't have much character to them. I've got some hand-made ones in the back that I haven't had a chance to bring out. A friend of my makes 'em. Let me go in back and see what I have.”

The shopkeeper disappeared into the back room. I heard him whistling as he rummaged around. The pain had pretty much faded but I knew it would return. I needed to get back to the hotel room and take a pain pill. The shopkeeper came out of the back room carrying a very strange-looking stick.

“I think you'll like this one. My buddy said he was up in the mountains looking around for suitable wood and came across this.”

He held it out for me to look at. I had to admit I'd never seen a walking stick like it. It looked like two different trees, like an oak maybe, and a dark walnut, had been planted right next to each other. As they grew they wound tightly together to produce a really interesting walking stick.

The shopkeeper said, “there was a lot of wood like this just laying around, he said. He made a map so he could come back the next day to pick up more pieces. But when he went back he couldn't find the

spot. Said that someone had moved the trees around.”

The shopkeeper brought his hand up to his mouth and acted like he was smoking a little cigarette. “He was always getting into the herbs, if you know what I mean. Moved the trees, yeah sure.” He laughed.

It was amazing how tightly the white and dark woods had twisted around each other, kind of like they had been grown like that on purpose. The artist had added a rubberized tip to the bottom end. Up toward the top, where I would hold it, it was carved to give a better grip, with shiny hammered copper bands wrapped around the top and bottom of the grip area. And the most interesting part was the top, where a stylized dragon's head, looking up toward the sky, had been carved. He had managed to carve the head where one side was white, the other dark. It was pretty cool looking. But ...

“Wow, that's very nice, but how much?” I figured it was pretty pricey, after all it was a touristy place. But considering I had no need to save money I didn't really care.

“Normally a hundred twenty bucks, but considering your situation I'll let it go for \$25 including tax.”

I couldn't believe it. “Seriously? Wow, that's very nice. But won't your friend be a little upset?”

The shopkeeper shook his head. “Nah, he does this as a hobby. I don't know what he does for a living, not sure I want to, if you know what I mean. He won't miss a few bucks on this.”

“Well, okay, I appreciate this.”

We walked up to the front where I gave him my credit card. I had upped the balance so that any expenses I had before I went up into the mountains would be covered if, or when, I didn't come back.

After he ran the card through the reader I saw him get a funny look. I knew what was coming. As he handed the card back to me he started to say, “uh, the name on the card...”

“Yeah, I know. Dillon Marshall. My parents were so funny.”

“Lots of crap in school?”

“Oh yeah, first day of class; Marshall, Dillon. The new teachers were always, 'Really'? Fortunately back then most kids were fans of the western, otherwise it would have really sucked. At least my middle name isn't 'Chester'.

The shopkeeper laughed. “Thank goodness for small favors.”

After a pause the shopkeeper said, “Ah, great, finally.” I signed the authorization slip quickly so he wouldn't see the hand tremors.

When I handed the slip back he said, “thanks. By the way, watch out for the spike on the bottom. Be sure you don't stick it through your foot or someone else's.”

I picked stick up and took a look at the bottom. Sure enough, when I gave the rubber tip a twist a three-inch spike slid out. “Nice touch.”

I slide the spike back up and locked it into place. I started toward the door, then I stopped and turned back.

“By the way, any idea what the weather is supposed to be like? I checked the forecasts and it was supposed to be clear, but I see a bunch of really dark clouds up in the mountains.”

“Ah, a Scout like you isn’t worried about a little rain are you?” he asked.

“Me? Nah, of course not. Not real wild about the mud though. Gets into everything and it's a bitch to clean up.”

“True. Well, the weather up here is always a little flaky, but the forecasters say there aren't supposed to be any fronts coming through. Yet, we got the clouds up there.” He paused for a bit, then continued. “It's kind of strange though.”

“Strange? In what way?”

“Well, those dark clouds have been pretty much lingering around for over a week. They build up, then dissipate a bit, but they never go away. Couple of days ago they got real dark, almost black. Lots of thunder. You would have thought we would have seen flashes of lightning, but there weren't. The fire watchers said it was weird, all that rumbling but no lightning. No rain either.”

I looked out through the windows. Sure enough, the distant snow-topped mountains were still covered by really dark, ominous-looking clouds. I could hear the faint rumble of thunder.

The shopkeeper continued. “What was really weird was what happened, let's see, I think it was the day before yesterday. I was in here, working with a customer toward the back of the shop. I heard a loud sound of breaking glass. Ah crap, I thought, someone broke my window. I ran up to the front but the windows were okay. I stepped out and saw 'ol Bob from the shop next door. He thought it was his window that had been broken. Several people were standing on the sidewalk, staring up at the mountains. They swore that the sound came from up there. Right after that the thunder got really loud and we actually saw some flashes. Then it calmed back down. We thought maybe a plane or chopper had crashed up there. But the local cops and the park rangers checked it out.” He shrugged. “No one knows what it was.”

Oh great. That was exactly where I was planning on going.

The shopkeeper interrupted my thoughts. “Well, it looks bad, but I wouldn’t worry too much.”

“Hope you’re right. I'd hate to spend my time sitting up there cold and shivering under a tarp. Thanks for the stick. Take it easy.”

“You’re welcome, enjoy your stay.” He gave me a little wave as I stepped out the door.

I decided to grab a bite to eat first. After I ate I headed back to the room and checked my camping prep list one more time.

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The next day I was hiking up a barely visible trail. I had been dropped off early in the morning near the trail's head. I remembered the conversation I'd had with the driver before he left.

“You sure you don't want me to come pick you up?” he asked.

“Nah. I'm not sure exactly how far I'm going or when I'll be coming back. Kind of playing it by ear. For the first time in my life I won't be living on someone else's schedule. Nothing personal.”

I could tell he wasn't wild about my answer. “Well okay. Just be careful. Things can go wrong fast when you're up in the mountains, especially at this time of the year and more so since you're by yourself. Remember, there's no cell phone coverage where you are going.”

“I know. I've done this before, and I'm always very careful.” I didn't tell him that I hadn't planned on coming back, this way or any other way.

I had already spent several hours walking up the trail. I took a break every thirty minutes or so, trying not to push myself too hard. I was engrossed in the wonders of nature; the majestic snow-covered mountains that I could glimpse through the trees, the amazing trees covered with little spring buds, and the little bits of green pushing up through the ground. Small mounds of snow and ice were still tucked away in sheltered spots. The beautiful scenery, plus the effort spent going up the steep hill had kept my mind off the pain.

During one of my breaks I started to have second thoughts. Dying at home, alone and in pain, wasn't the end I wanted. Ending it all up in the mountains, where I would be at peace, had a nice ring to it. Of course, even though my religious beliefs are somewhat tenuous, I kind of wondered what might happen after I did it. Would it be the end or would there be something after, and if so, would I be screwing that up by taking my life. I had no desire to go back when I didn't have any hope. That's why I had stuck my Glock 21 in my backpack's side pocket. Plus, you never know when you might have to deal with a wolf or worse while wandering around the forest. I decided to play it by ear and see how I felt after a week.

I took a long break a little after eleven. I had been hiking for around four hours, but I was a little more tired than I thought I would be. Not sure if it was because of the altitude or the cancer. Probably a little of both. Fortunately the clean air helped keep me going. I looked up. Through the trees I could see dark roiling clouds. It was weird, seeing the clouds and hearing the thunder but not seeing any lightning. And, thankfully so far, not a drop of rain. I slipped off the backpack and sat on a rock outcropping. I took off my camo boonie hat and wiped my forehead with my sleeve. I leaned forward

to stretch my back, hoping that the pain would hold off for a bit longer. I took in deep breaths of the cool and fresh mountain air. I could get used to this, I thought, if only.

As I sat there I tried to decide if I should go on or set up camp. From out of no where came this really strange sound. At first I wasn't sure I'd actually heard it. Then I heard it again. It was a long wailing sound, almost like a baby crying. I turned my head back and forth trying to locate the sound. I heard it again. It sounded like it was up the hill a bit. I thought 'oh what the hell' and decided to check it out. I slung my backpack over my shoulders and started uphill.

I had gone maybe a hundred yards when I heard it. This time it was coming directly from my left. It was kind of weird how the direction had suddenly changed. I turned to the left and started walking. I wasn't paying much attention to where I was going and I hadn't pulled out my GPS. If I had I would have realized later that the trees HAD been moved.

I'd gone about twenty or so yards when I heard the sound. It was coming from downhill. That worried me. First it was uphill, then to the side, then below. Whatever it was appeared to be circling me. If it was then whatever it was might be wounded and dangerous. I dug my pistol out and clipped the holster onto my belt. I chambered a round before I went any further. I started downhill, using my fancy walking stick to keep me from falling. When I heard the wail again it seemed much closer than before.

I came upon a pair of strange looking trees growing up out of the ground between some large boulders. They formed a very distinct V-shape between those rocks. They would make it easy to find my way back to the trail. As I stepped between the trees the clouds appeared to break up enough to let the sun through the greenish canopy over my head. I looked down and suddenly found myself in a dry and very rocky creek bed. Whoa, I thought, where did that come from. I turned around and looked back up the hill. The fully developed creek appeared on this side of the trees but it didn't run up the hill any further. I wasn't a geologist or streamologist but I thought that was strange.

I should have turned back around before I took another step. Instead I stepped backward and into a hole that had been gouged out of the stream bed. I let out a yelp and felt my knee twist. I quickly recovered but the damage had been done. I could still bend and straighten the knee but it hurt like hell and I could feel a little catch when I bent it. I wondered if I should dig my knee brace out but then I heard the wail again, followed by whimpering.

I forgot about the brace and used my stick for support. The creek went downhill for another thirty or so feet until it ended at a small cliff. The tree-lined creek continued down the hill out of site beyond the cliff. The whimpering sound came from below the cliff. As I slowly walked to the edge I noticed a round boulder as big as a beach ball wedged between the rocks. There was another deep gouge in the ground just in front of the boulder. That must have been what had created the gouge I'd twisted my knee in. For some dumb reason someone had tied a rough looking rope, about two inches in diameter, around the boulder. I took a closer look and it looked like someone had woven a thick silvery thread through the rope. Why would someone weave silver through such a cheap-looking rope? That didn't make any sense. The rope disappeared over the cliff's edge.

I wasn't sure what I would see so I carefully looked over the edge. I tell you, you could have knocked me over with a feather, or even the whole chicken for that matter. The silvery threaded rope fell down to the bottom of the cliff, along the creek bed for a few feet, and was tied securely to a large, dark reddish-looking scaled leg. I know, unbelievable. I couldn't help but stare at the creature that belonged to that leg. I shook my head and rubbed my eyes but it didn't help. My pain meds had never made me see things, but there was a first time for anything I guessed. Lying there in the rocky creek bed was a ten foot long dragon. It's red leathery-looking wings were spread out behind him like he had been trying to fly, but the jammed boulder had kept him from becoming airborne. His long tail, also about ten feet long, was curled around his body. His almost two foot long head laid on the ground. It made that familiar whimpering sound.

I always loved reading those SciFi fantasy books about magicians and dragons and stuff. It was as if one of those dragons had flown out of one of those books and landed in the creek. I must have made a sound because he raised its head and looked back at me. He immediately tucked his wings back in and tried to shuffle away. The rope quickly reminded him that he was going nowhere. He bared his shiny white and really long sharp teeth and uttered a low growl. I didn't know what to do so I just stood there. After a few seconds it stopped growling and baring its teeth but it continued looking at me. Finally it turned away and let out another whimper. I saw a little tremor in the leg that was attached to the rope.

I finally came to my senses, as if seeing a dragon made any sense. The dragon looked back at me again, whimpered, and then looked at its rope-wrapped leg. In the poor light I saw that there was a nasty looking raw sore where the rope touched the leg. I looked at the rope, then the boulder, and then back at the dragon. I assumed the dragon had been trying to fly away but the boulder tied to its leg had become wedged in the rocks. At the time I didn't think about why someone would tie a dragon to a boulder. I probably should have.

I don't know what possessed me to help this creature. A smart person would have run away screaming. Of course, I've never been accused of being a smart person. If I had been, smart that is, then all that happened after would never have happened.

“Take it easy, champ,” I said. I tried using calming words, thinking about all those 'dog whisperer' episodes I'd seen. “Let me see if I can help you.”

I removed my folding knife from my belt and cut the rope at the cliff's edge. I carefully dropped it over the cliff. The dragon looked back.

“There you go, little fella, fly, be free!” I kind of made a shooing motion. “See, rope's cut. Go!”

The dragon looked at the rope and at me. We held eye contact for several seconds. Then it turned away. It drew its leg in but winced in pain. And it didn't try to get away.

Damn. I'd hoped that once it was free it would fly away. Or at least walk away. I guess its leg was in worse shape than I thought.

There wasn't an easy way down, at least not with the backpack on. I shrugged it off and cut the remaining rope away from the boulder. The resulting piece looked long enough so I tied one end around the pack and lowered it to the creek bed below, a little too close to the dragon's leg but nothing I could do about that.

I moved to the side of the creek bed and carefully scooted over the cliff's edge. I slid down the steep embankment and made it safely to the bottom without hurting my leg any further. The dragon watched me as I slowly approached, which was okay, because I was watching him closely, too.

Holding a hand out in front of me I said, "easy chuckles, I'm not going to hurt you. Just let me get around so I can cut you free."

I kept as much space as I could between me and those sharp teeth as I slowly moved across the rocky creek bed. I was treading cautiously so as not to alarm him or to twist my knee any more. When I reached his leg I could see that the wound under the vine was even worse looking. The rope appeared to have actually worn through the scales. I couldn't understand why because the rope wasn't that tight. Besides, they were dragon scales. I thought they were supposed to be as hard as iron. I also couldn't understand why the dragon hadn't just bitten through the rope.

"Hmm. I guess that wound must be pretty painful, friend. Not sure if you'll let me help with that or not."

I laid the staff next to me, close enough to grab in case the dragon made a go at me. I rolled up my sleeves and took out my folding knife. I carefully cut the rope and tossed the end away from the dragon. The dim light made it difficult to see, but I was afraid to use my crank flashlight in case it scared the poor thing. As I looked at the wound in the poor light I heard heavy breathing and then felt as well as smelled a hot and slightly sulfurous breath on my neck. I had been concentrating so much on removing the rope that I had not noticed the dragon bending its neck around so it could watch what I was doing. As a result his head about just a foot or so away from mine.

I closed my eyes and waited for it to bite my head off. Since the bite didn't happen I thought I might be okay. I gently touched the leg above the wound. I expected it to be cool to the touch but it was a little warm and the scales were smooth and slightly flexible.

"Wow, cool," I said. At almost the same time the dragon seemed to sigh. Not sure if it was from relief or hope. Since it still hadn't moved I wondered what I should do next.

"Well," I'm not sure why I said it this out loud. "The rope is off, but that wound looks pretty bad. I should at least put something on it."

I slowly stood as the dragon watched. "Beep?" was all it said.

"Exactly. Let me see what I can find in my first aid kit." I walked over to my beloved backpack and dug out my first aid kit. I had to risk the flashlight so I could find the antibacterial ointment, gauze, and

medical tape. The dragon tilted its head as he watched me give my battery-less flashlight a couple of cranks and then turn it on. I saw its eyes open in surprise. Once I found what I needed I turned the flashlight off.

When I walked back to the dragon I noticed he was staring intensely at the flashlight.

“It's just a flashlight, buddy. See?” I held it out to him, letting him take a sniff.

As I knelt next to the wounded leg I felt the hot breath on my neck again. I put a little of the ointment on my finger and held it up at the dragon. He gave it a sniff.

“I'm just going to put some of this on your wound, just like this, okay?” I dabbed a bit on my arm and showed it to him. “See? Nothing to worry about. So please don't bite me.”

I squeezed out a larger amount and then, very, very gently, touched my finger to his wound. The dragon jerked his leg back out of the way, but I tried to reassure him. It almost seemed like he understood because he returned his leg back to where I could reach it. Anyway, I wanted to be sure he didn't have an allergic reaction to it. I didn't think there would be but you never know about dragons. After waiting a minute there didn't seem to be a reaction, so I spread the ointment around the wound. I wrapped the gauze around the leg a few times and secured it in place with the tape.

I gave his leg a slight pat and leaned back to survey my handiwork. “I guess I've done all that I can, I think.” The dragon laid his head back on the ground with a long sigh. “I guess you are okay with it as well.”

I glanced at my watch. Damn, it was after 6:00. The sun seemed to be a little high in the sky for this time of the day but I didn't think much of it. Surprisingly, the temperature was fairly warm too, not at all what I expected at this time of year and at this altitude. As I stood I noticed how much my knee had stiffened. I decided I would get out my knee brace and set up camp someplace nearby. I hobbled back to the backpack and dug out my brace and put it on.

After giving my brace a final adjustment I took out a piece of my homemade, preservative free jerky and my water bottle. I tore off a piece and was chewing it when I noticed the dragon looking at me.

“You hungry?” I held out the jerky before I remembered that warning about not feeding wild animals. Against my better judgment I walked over and held it out to him. He moved his head over and gave the jerky a sniff and then a lick. I guess he must have liked it because he wrapped his tongue around it and drew the jerky into his mouth. He chewed for maybe two seconds and then swallowed. He opened his mouth as if asking for more.

“Hey Mikey, I think he likes it.” I laughed and grabbed another. “Here you go.”

After giving him the second piece I took a chance and carefully moved my hand toward his head. He didn't move, so I gently gave his head a rub. After he finished the second piece he gave me a “Geep”

and then laid his head down. I pulled out a protein bar, quickly ate it, and then washed it down with water.

I knew no one was going to believe this. If there had been enough light I would have taken a selfie. After my quick meal I had to think about camp. Spending the night in a creek bed, even if dry, would probably be a bad idea. I saw a rock shelf a few feet beyond the dragon and it looked to be out of reach of any water. I grabbed my staff and backpack and hobbled past the dragon. He raised his head as I passed. I thought for sure he would try to leave, but he just watched me go, tilting his head to one side as if to ask where I was going.

“Don't worry fellow, just going to set up camp up here.” As I passed the dragon I carefully reached out and gave his head another rub. “Nice dragon.” I could have sworn I heard him purr.

It took a couple of tries for me to make it up to the rock shelf. The damn knee was giving me that much trouble. Though it was still unseasonably warm I took out the sleeping mat and then the bag. I'd just lay on top until it got too cold then I'd crawl inside. As I laid there I started wondering about that silvery thread woven through the rope. Was it really silver? I wondered how much it was worth. Thoughts about the dragon and that silver thread kept my mind so busy that I couldn't sleep. Even though I would never find out how much the silver was worth, I decided to check it out anyway. I climbed down and hobbled over to get the rope. As I picked up the rope the dragon made a hissing sound.

I turned around slowly. “Don't worry, amigo. I'm just going to take this away from you.”

I coiled it in my hand and then gave the dragon a wide berth. He watched as I climbed up onto the shelf. I hoped he would decide to go away but he just laid there.

I examined the silver. At least it looked like silver, though it was a little darker than I remembered silver looking. Probably tarnished by being exposed to the weather. I sure thought it was a waste of money to weave that into the rope. Since it was still light and I didn't have anything else to keep me occupied I pulled the silver thread out of the rope. It was about the same thickness as the yarn you might find in a sweater. Since it looked pretty I decided to wrap it around the walking stick. I figured whoever finds me, if anyone does, will get a really nice walking stick. It took a while to press the silvery thread into the crevices formed by the intertwined wood but the effort was worth it. It added a nice contrast with the differently colored woods. Unfortunately the ends of the thread wouldn't stay put.

I dug through the backpack and pulled out a disposable lighter. I ran the flame over the ends of the silvery thread to soften it and then used my knife to press it into the wood. I heard a soft 'gleep'. The dragon had raised his head over the edge of the rock shelf and was watching me play with the lighter. The flame really seemed to interest him.

“Ah, sorry. It's just a lighter, nothing to worry about. See?” I flicked the lighter back on. “Just a little flame.”

And that's when it hit. I had hoped that maybe the spasms and pain would stay away but no. Excruciating pain shot throughout my body. I'm not sure if I screamed or not. I fell over into an almost fetal position and broke out into a cold sweat. After an eternity it started to fade. I don't know how long I was incapacitated. I took deep breaths and tried to gather my thoughts. I struggled to push myself back up. I had totally forgotten about the dragon. He had crawled up onto the shelf and was looking at me with a strange look in his eyes. I guess he was trying to understand what had just happened.

“Sorry about that chum, but it's the cancer inside. Fortunately, it won't be bothering me much longer, one way or the other.”

The dragon moved until he was a foot or so away and then started sniffing me. I thought maybe I'd lost control over my bladder or worse. He kept sniffing and moving closer until he was just inches away. It was weird, having the dragon sniff me like that from toe to head.

“Not sure what you're doing, sport, but the jerky's in the backpack. Give me a minute or two to recover and I'll get you another piece.”

He moved back a few feet once his smell test was complete. He cocked his head to one side and stared at me as if considering something. I wondered what was going on in that big head of his. He straightened his head, closed his eyes, and then started slowly swaying back and forth. I could hear a faint rumbling coming from inside of him. I wasn't sure if it was because of my latest attack or the dragon's hypnotic swaying back and forth, but I suddenly realized how tired I was. I moved around so I could lean back against the rock wall. I let out a sigh and closed my eyes.

I don't know what it was that woke me but I opened my eyes. The dragon was no longer swaying back and forth. Instead he was moving his head forward and backward in a jerky motion, like he was going to throw up. I guessed that the jerky hadn't agreed with him.

“What's wrong partner? Hey man, if you are going to upchuck point it over the side please.”

I waved my right arm and then I tried to gently point his head over the edge of the rock shelf. I didn't want him messing up my sleeping bag. Suddenly the dragon opened his mouth and clamped down on my arm. I screamed as his pointed teeth jabbed into me. I tried to jerk away but the dragon's hold was too great. I tried to hit him with my other arm but the biting pain became an even greater searing pain. I felt a burning sensation spread from the bite area and up my arm. It was injecting poison into me like a rattlesnake. I tried to grab for my walking stick but it was out of reach. There wasn't anything I could do. After an eternity the dragon let go. There were two bloody holes in my arm, one above the elbow and one below, about 8 inches apart. I thought about applying a tourniquet to slow the poison, but I could see that a brilliant blue tint had already reached my upper arm.

“You son of a bitch!” I told it. “After I saved you from whatever it was, you go and do that.”

The burning sensation quickly spread across my shoulders and then into my chest. I thought the pain

from the cancer had been bad. It was nothing compared to the burning sensation spreading throughout my body. It felt like every cell in my body was on fire. The dragon had stepped back a few feet to watch me writhe in pain. It was then I remembered I had my gun strapped to my waist.

If it was the last thing I did I was going to shoot that bastard. I reached for the pistol at the same time the burning sensation reached the back of my head. Everything began to swirl around and around and around. My arm went limp before I could reach the holster. The last thing I remembered before passing out was the dragon moving toward me to finish me off.