

Chapter 9

MY PONY, MY SLINGSHOT AND ME

The black leaves exploded from the tree! An ethereal vortex spiraled them into the sky and the leaves turned toward Bareback Jack and his mount. He watched in fascinated horror as the leaves became crows again. He shook off the trifled fascination gripping his brain and grabbed onto Avalanches reigns. Nothing to do but run now, even though he knew his and Avalanches chances were about zilch! Avalanche rippled and bucked wanting direction from his rider. Jack looked around at the empty plain that had promised a faster path and cursed. Nowhere to run. Avalanche bucked again!

“Hold on,” he calmed himself and let his senses fill him. He could feel the fury of the crows spiraling and whipping the sky ahead of him. The whip grass, blue-green and razor sharp to his left, not that way, the cottonwoods and their thick layer of saplings and vines would make good cover but too far, behind him the fence and the river too far! Ahead of him the dead tree. It’s massive branches, most short, eroded by wind and time seem to call to him. The tree had been the crows perch and a doomsday sign post if he had ever seen one. But Bareback Jack trusted his mind to his senses. He called it his gut sense. What it really was, and even knowing what it was he still like to call it

'trusting his gut' was letting his thoughts pour out of his mind: the fear, the crows, the message, the Goblin King, his loved ones, his trusted pony, everything had to clear out so he could see and feel clearly.

He was really good at it. Where most folks would feel trapped, confused, frightened or plain done for, Bareback Jack let his mind fill up with the music of the world and when it did he could dance to it like no other! The first time he felt it was when he was just a kid. They had been swimming in the Blue Dragon's Lake when all of them knew it was close to hatching time and not the smartest time to be enjoying a spring swim. But winter had been long and the first days of spring were still tainted with the cool morning frosts of winters goodbyes. So they made the excuses that excited Tickle and people everywhere make for themselves when fun takes precedence to danger. But not young Jack; he knew the danger was there and there was really no 'safe' time to be swimming in this particular dragon lake. What he didn't know was what made it so easy for him to ignore the danger even though it presented itself more clearly than it did to his friends. Not that it didn't scare him, it did, but he felt something would see him through no matter what happened. What he came to learn later in his life is that when he felt the cool, calm waves absorbing him danger was always right around the corner.

When Blue dragons nest their eggs they do so beneath the water and deep into the sand below. Eggs from the blue Dragons are unique among egg laying dragons. The eggs *grow* and absorb oxygen from the water to keep the small resident in the egg alive. It is not uncommon for a baby blue dragon egg to be twenty times the size of the dragon itself. In the case of blue dragons the egg and the dragon inside are linked with one another. When it

comes time for the young to leave the safety of the egg where it's been incubating for over a years time the egg and the dragon begins their long farewells. The fairies say that the mother and father dragon put stories into the egg so that the egg can tell the young dragon forming inside all the things they need to know before they leave the egg. No one's ever asked an egg though. What happens first is the eggs thick shell and its honeycombed interior begin to thin and weaken. The dragon helps this along by slowly eating the honeycomb inside of the egg, its very first meal. When enough of the egg has been eaten away and its shell is no longer strong enough to keep the weight of the water from crushing it the egg blooms. It blooms like a flower facing the wrong way and the mass of escaping air catches the neck sacs full of air beneath the dragons jaw and speeds the dragons to the surface like rockets. When a clutch hatches beneath the lake the lake seems to boil and explode. Blue dragons are very prolific egg layers. There is hardly ever a clutch of eggs that number less than twenty and the eggs always hatch at the same time. When twenty baby blue dragons leave their eggs the amount of energy released beneath the water is amazing. The frightening part is the void left by the collapsed eggs. The air escaping from the eggs pushes the dragons to the surface so fast that the dragons can spread their wings and take flight meters above the surface of the water and avoid being dragged back below by the void. It was a beautiful sight. Unless, of course, you were swimming above a hatching clutch of blue dragons. The Dragon's Cauldrons is what the water is called after the beautiful eruption of baby dragons takes to the sky. The void left in the water filling itself up again? It's called the . The swift pull of the water would take anything from the surface and pull it directly to the bottom of the lake as fast as you never want to go.

That is exactly where Little G, as his friends called him back then, and his friends found themselves. The first clutch hatched far from the shore toward the middle of the Lake and far enough away from their little swimming party as to cause them no immediate danger. But they all knew when one clutch hatched others were sure to follow. Four of his friends made breakneck speed toward the shore. Once there they cheered the others to swim faster hooting and laughing between their calls to swim faster not quite yet aware of the peril their friends were about to face. He hung back, calmly telling the others not to swim fast but just to keep swimming to shore even when the first tiny bubbles tickled up his belly and around his neck. Clearly he was not the only one to feel them. "Do you feel it too?" Their eyes asked looking back at him, Little Gertrudemous, ignored their terror, told them to keep swimming. Then the tiny bubbles became a sizzling foam.

The first big ones made a heavy drum sound as they reached and broke the surface. Little G heard his friends screams and ignored them, yelling now to them to swim harder. Then, out in front of him, a fury of white spray and foam launched Pits into the sky. It was the first of the clutch below them. The baby Blue came up directly beneath, Pits caught him in the belly and launched them both into the sky. The baby dragon was not at all too happy about having his introduction to the heavens interrupted by a rather fat Tickle and Pits was tossed off, luckily in the general direction of the lakes shore and far enough into the shallows the he would be able to drag himself to the safety of the rocks and sand. The moment that Pits and the dragon rocketed clumsily up into the air in a foamy explosion of dragon shrieks and tickle screams, Little G's world slowed down. It slowed down a lot. He could see the neck sacs of the little blue dragon shining pearlescent through the sunshine and the glittering

droplets dancing away from the tiny scales, little rainbows flashing so fast he doubted his eyes. He could see the terror wide eyes of Pits as the air was knocked from his lungs and the dragon whipping its neck to set Pits sailing against the blue sky. The bubbles coming up from directly beneath him, too were slowed into gelatinous pockets full of wonder.

He didn't know what it was, the voice, the hand, the thing pulling his attention into the dark water beneath him. He couldn't resist the feeling in his body to swim down. So he didn't. He took as deep a breath as his lungs would allow and dove. The bubbles became thicker and thicker and the water darker. He was oblivious to what surface meant and what air meant and, even if he could have heard them, the cries of his friends to come up and save himself. The water became his world. The discs of air rapidly making their way to the surface became the music of the lake, its voice and its power. He felt the water and the pockets of rising air moving all around him. So many in moments that he was hard pressed to see beyond them. But he needed to. He needed to see, to glimpse the blue shiny head of what he knew was coming up like a rocket beneath him. And there it was. The head of the blue dragon, first a tiny speck of diamond blue, then a teardrop, and then he pushed back against the water pushing himself back just enough to see the head go past and to reach out his hand in just the right moment, the right notes of the music, to grab hold of the dragons tail!

It's how, he realized, his legend got its first taste of air, of words. The trio into the air was brief and not as magical as diving toward the depths of the lake, through the rising air making its way to the surface. As soon as the dragon realized she had a hitchhiker she did an unexplainable loop into the air and tossed Little G higher into the sky than he thought possible. He

was unlucky that day. He didn't finish letting the music take him through all the way to the end. If he had, he would have let go of the dragons tail as soon as they broke the surface of the water and he would have ended up somewhere in the general vicinity of his friend Pits. Instead, he watched Pits' neck arc and Pits' wide eyes flow as he sailed high above him. Over the shoreline and Pits fell backward into the sand. Over the sand and Little G closed his eyes as he knew what was coming. Into the hard rocks above the sand he landed with as much grace as a potato meeting a mallet.

It took him two months to heal all the broken bones in his body. But his bones did heal. His friends and family never could understand how he kept a smile on his face the entire time he was laid up in bed. They didn't understand because they hadn't heard the music beneath the lake. They had never heard the universe make seconds of chaos into a symphony of stilled heartbeats, glimpses of art in the world so profound that it made him well up with tears and laugh so long that it made everyone worry about his mind.

Every Tickle told him he was one lucky Tickle. Every Tickle in the lake that day was one lucky Tickle they all said. But only he knew who was the luckiest Tickle of them all. He knew he was. He knew that something entirely special, something entirely his own and one thing that he would have for the rest of his life was born into him that day on the lake. He would always call it the day he got his guts, although, he knew it was much more than that.

make for the tree

His gut told him. He signaled Avalanche and loosed the reigns on the huge caterpillar. At first Avalanche did not move.

“That’s right,” Bareback yelled, “to the tree!” Avalanche, knowing his rider would never steer him wrong, moved with all the speed he could muster toward the tree, toward the crows. This confused the crows. The lead crow lost it’s deadly momentum as he saw his prey, not running, but moving toward him! The Crow dropped down and the crows behind him followed lighting over the tips of the tall grass.

Bareback reached and gave a tug on a long spine from Avalanches back. He pulled it free and laid it over his knees. He took his slingshot and loosened its band, pulled his two spare bands out and tied them together with the first. One end he tied to the tip of the spine the other to its bottom. He quickly reached and pulled a smaller spine from Avalanche! He raised his makeshift bow and knocked the spine into the band. He pulled the band back and waited until the lead crow came up above the grass.

not yet

The crows spun like a cyclonic arrowhead toward Bareback! Avalanche, his brave steed, did not waver. Not to his surprise, Avalanche pushed harder toward the tree. His legs thundered beneath Bareback and he smiled.

The lead crow could see the massive caterpillar getting closer. He let his claws hang below his chest. The other crows followed suit. They would cut the caterpillar and it’s rider to ribbons. No one would get through to the Fairies. No one would sound the alarm. No army would be raised. Nothing would stop the march of the Goblins. But the crow didn’t care, not really. War would bring food to his flock no matter where or how it happened. Something else was telling him to stop the message, something so sinister the crow hardly knew why he was trying to

keep anything from getting to the Fairies. But he would do what the thing in his mind was telling him to do. He would rip the caterpillar to shreds and...

now

Bareback loosed the spine from his hand. The band thrummed like a guitar string in the universes' orchestra as the spine came away from it and sailed into the air. The crow saw a strange dot appear in front of him. The dot wobbled and got longer, then turned into a dot again and then the dot went straight through him and into the bird behind him. The Crows burst into the air as if they had hit an invisible wall. They saw their leader fall and the one behind him. They were trying to understand what just happened. It would't take them long to recover. Bareback let another spine fly into the cloud of crows.

The tree was closer now. Now he saw what his gut saw. Something had been using the tree as a burrow, a rather large something judging by the size of the hole. It was good news. The crows wouldn't follow him below ground; against their nature! But the burrow was still far and the crows were recovering. He pulled another spine free and twisted around to see the crows forming up behind him. Bareback had seen birds do some funny things before but he had never seen anything like how these crows were acting. They were moving like something in the world was duding them all at once. In a way, he thought, it was strangely, hypnotically beautiful – Avalanche whinnied and Bareback shook his head. Now *that* was weird! Was he almost hypnotized by a flock of crows? He believed he almost was! He let the third spine fly directly into the frontmost crow. He hit his target and again they broke apart and flew up into the sky to gather themselves again. They were recovering faster this time. He plucked another spine. Avalanche whined.

“Don’t worry,” Bareback leaned toward Avalanche’s head, “I won’t pull ‘em all out!”

He thought for a moment as Avalanche’s legs pounded the earth, “What?” He waved the spine out in front of him, “Did you have other plans for these?”

The crows were coming down again! He loosed again and the spine hit the lead crow again! Another crow dropped into the front of the vortex. They weren’t scaring now.

“We’re in trouble, pal!” Bareback pulled two long spines from Avalanche. He turned and balanced himself on the saddle holding the two spines out like swords. Avalanche belched out a series of whines that was, even though it sounded more like belching frogs, a caterpillar laugh.

Bareback turned his head, his brow wrinkled not understanding, back toward the caterpillar’s head. “You got a better idea?” He screamed at the caterpillar!

The crows started to drop! Their claws out with malicious and deadly intent glinted in the sun. Bareback Jack said a tickle prayer to himself and gripped the spines tight in his fists, “Ok you feathered freaks! Let’s see what you got!”

Avalanche stopped! The world changed for Jack. He went flying through the air. He watched past the spines in his hands, Avalanche get smaller. He watched the crows coming down on Avalanche. They were nearly on top him. And then the caterpillar exploded.

Every long spine on Avalanche back, every short spine, every blue tipped spine, every and any spine that could come away from his body launched into the air. Crows fell from everywhere in the sky! Then Jack hit the ground and rolled. He

got up and looked toward his steed. Avalanche had taken more than half of the crows army away. The laid in twisted feathers on the ground. The other crows flew up and away fro the caterpillar but they did not keep flying away. They hovered and decided they were still many and enough to destroy the caterpillar and it's rider.

run

Avalanched called out to him! "I'm not gonna run," he yelled back at the caterpillar even though he knew he had too. He had been thrown over halfway to the tree and the burrow was in sight. He turned back again to see the crows falling toward Avalanche. He couldn't watch. He turned and put everything he had into his legs. He ran faster than he ever had in his life. Avalanche whinnied one last cry. He dared not look back.

He came up to the burrow beneath the great gnarled roots of the old tree and threw himself down into it. He fell and rolled and fell and stopped. He didn't move. He cried for his friend who sacrificed himself for his life Above him the hole was being investigated by the crows. He could hear their shrieks and cawing questions. He could see their moving shadows changing the light down in the hole. They would not come into the burrow.

Then they did. Jack didn't move. The crows had killed his caterpillar, his steed, his mighty pony. He moved. He stood up. His tears stopped.

Well, that wouldn't be for nothing, he thought. He saw the eyes of the first crow as it ducked its head into the narrow space. It's beak open and searching.

He stepped back further into the burrow. The music of the universe had stopped. His gut told him nothing. At least that's what he had thought. Then his gut had a voice all its own,

outside of himself. In fact, the voice sounded a lot like it was behind him.

He turned back and looked into the darkness behind him. Several glinting blue eyes blinked in the dark.

“Tickles should know better,” the glinting blue eyes said.

In a heartbeat Bareback Jack knew exactly where he was, what he was standing in front of and just how completely doomed he was. Oh well, he thought, he had tried.

“And crows,” the voice from below the blue eyes continued, “don’t even belong on the branches of my tree.” The crow, seemingly oblivious to where he was and what was talking to him, took another step forward. Bareback was knocked to the side of the hole by a big blue scaled hand. A long nose passed in from of his face and the six eyes of a Darlinger Dragon glanced at him briefly. The dragon took a deep breath. The crow cawed a question. The dragon let out his breath and the crow disappeared in a smokey blue flame.

“Are there more?” The dragon asked the little Tickle.

“Some,” he said quietly.

“Don’t go anywhere,” the dragon said and sped up out of his burrow.

Bareback Jack sat back on his haunches and leaned his head against the cold earth. He remembered a song an old Tickle used to sing to him when he was young. He couldn’t remember all the words, but he tried singing it anyway.

“Me, my pony and my slingshot rode out one day, out into the sun, me my pony and my slingshot....” He couldn’t sing. He

could only cry and listen to the crows scream above him as they all turned into blue flames.