



# **RYUHIKO**

A Novella by

**Russell E. Vance, III**



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR.

Russell E. (Rusty) Vance, III, PhD. is a retired psychotherapist who, after retiring, has followed his passions and dreams. He and his wife, Pamela, spent the first ten years of his retirement as nomads spending over 90% of their time off-the-grid far out into the Sonoran Desert or in the dense cedar and hemlock forest of Glacier National Park in northwestern Montana where they served as volunteer campground hosts.

An unabashed tree-hugger and environmentalist, Rusty's post-retirement advocacy became wildlife management, living among and helping keep deer, mountain goats, moose, big horn sheep,

bears and other creatures safe. Many of his stories carry a strong environmental message. `

Rusty enjoys spending his evenings writing stories. He has published five novels –*AGEH*, *New Prince of Coillearnach*, *Tree of Life*, *Crack in Time*, *The Tillman Place* and *Mountain of Gold* – and several novella.

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*Triple Divide Peak*

**R**yuhiko stood on the Triple Divide Peak looking down the long valley of Hudson Bay Creek toward Red Eagle lake. He was well above the tree-line. The trees created a cushion of green far below him. A palette of greens and browns topped by the stark vertical linear lines of massive Mount James and Norris Mountain on each side of him. At the end of the valley was Red Eagle Mountain standing like a giant fortress with a rainbow crossing it like a sash. In the distance he could see the approaching storm. It was time. He looked down at his hand. It was just a jo decorated with runes. How had he come to this?



**S**hinmasa, known as Shin to his friends, was a second-generation Japanese-American. He was a very modern man from a rather traditional family. However, the youngest of five children, Shin was the only one of his siblings who paid any attention to the old traditions. He loved visiting Japan and having the opportunity to wear traditional kimono and hakama. He was a Koryu black-belt and the only one of the siblings who could still speak fluent Japanese. He told others he did it because of Japanese influence in the electronics market, but he knew that it was really because he enjoyed speaking Japanese with his parents and listening to his parents and grandparents tell stories of their childhood in Japan. He loved the Zen Buddhist philosophy of life and was a dedicated vegetarian but he had nothing to do with the religious aspects.

The Takeyo family had moved to Seattle where Shin grew up. Living among mountains, volcanos and geological faults it's no wonder that Shin became a geologist. He had earned his PhD in geophysics from Washington State University and was now doing research on the vulnerability of ground water as a result of the effect of global warming on high mountains for the Environmental Protection Agency even though he was an actual employee of the US Geological Survey.

He looked out across the panorama of mountains, lakes and valleys as he hiked the last five miles from where the researchers leave their cars. He was almost to the base camp used at any one time by as many as a dozen different researchers. The camp was at 8,700 feet and hung on the side of the mountain just below the tree-line. He always enjoyed staying here while doing his research. It was beautiful. It was remote wilderness, and he enjoyed spending time with fellow researchers and nature lovers.

Five of Shin's colleagues were supposed to have come with him, but they all canceled at the last minute. Confident that there were always people at the base camp, Shin decided to go alone. Now he was just in sight of the camp and could see smoke from campfires. He had been very confident, but he felt a sense of relief at the sight of the smoke and returned to admiring the scene around him.

No matter how many times he had been here it never got old. At this altitude the magnificent and gigantic Ponderosa pines forest, through which he had driven to the parking area almost a thousand feet below, were beginning to give way to the Douglas and Alpine Fir. These hearty survivors of often unbelievably severe winters, along with some Aspin along the creeks, provided a dense forest to close to eight-thousand feet elevation. Beyond the research camp there were almost no trees at all.

At the base camp there were at least six graduate students from Washington State, a PhD candidate from University of California at Berkley and two French researchers. He knew everyone there except one woman. She introduced herself as Mary Silva, a graduate student from

Penn State University researching the effect of climate change on mountain animals.

Shin set up his tent, threw his backpack inside, grabbed a small rucksack and asked everyone in general, “who's up for going up to the weather cluster?”

The weather cluster was a cluster of weather instruments that had been set on a barren ridge another four hundred feet up the mountain. It was a hard climb even for the best trekker but Shin was anxious to get a base reading.

“Are you crazy, Shin?” called a tall slender graduate student from WSU Shin knew as Loren. “It's almost one o'clock. You'd have to go like hell to get back here before dark.” The young man laughed again at the idea.

That was the general consensus of everyone except Mary.

“You really want to go, don't you?” she said.

“Yes, I'm anxious to get started,” Shin said with a smile. “Besides I love it up there. You're on top of the world.”

Mary smiled back. “Then, I'll go with you.”

“Really?”

“Sure,” said Mary. “I've heard about this weather cluster and you can help me sort it out. Besides,” Mary continued, “when the mountain lion jumps you because we're running around the mountain after dark, I'll get lots of new data.” She laughed. So did Shin.

A few hours later the two were arriving at the weather cluster. Mary sat down on a rock and stared out at the magnificent vista.

“Beautiful,” she said.

“Always!” exclaimed Shin as he hurried toward the cluster of scientific instruments.

“Are you always so focused on your work that you don't take time to look at the view?” asked Mary.

“Quite the contrary,” replied Shin. “I can sit and look at that panorama for hours without moving. The only reason I'm so focused today is that we don't have a lot of time before we need to get back.” Mary just smiled as Shin turned his attention back to the instruments in the box before him.

“I thought you wanted to learn about these?” called Shin.

“Oh, yes,” said Mary. “I was lost in the view.”

“That's why I came right here,” Shin laughed.

After a short tutorial on the weather cluster and a bit more time looking at the world below, the two started down the mountain. They made good time but it was still growing dusk as they entered the tree-line.

They had only gone a short distance when they came upon a small clearing filled with berry bushes. They were talking loudly, which is a good thing to do when hiking in the Rocky Mountains, and almost missed the movement just to their right. Suddenly a Grizzly stood up on his hind legs.

“Oh, boy,” said the startled Shin as he fumbled for the bear spray hanging from his belt.

“How are you, Mr. Bear?” called Mary. She had obviously been to bear school except that Shin saw no sign of bear spray. That was a given among those who spent any time in the mountains.

“You study these animals and you don't have any bear spray?”

“Don't need it,” Mary smiled.

The two of them kept moving away from the Grizzly who watched cautiously. Shin figured that the bear would be happiest when they moved away from his berries and Shin was more than willing to oblige. But suddenly the bear roared.

“Ena ke e,” yelled Mary.

The bear stopped and then returned to standing on all four. Shin was amazed. He had encountered a number of bears in his time in the mountains but he'd never seen anything like this. Then, to top it off, the bear lowered its head and stood silently as Shin and Mary backed down the mountain paying due respect and speaking politely to the massive animal.

After they were out of sight of the bear, Shin asked, “What was that you yelled at him?”

“Nothing,” said Mary. “Just making sounds. You know, like we're taught in bear school.”

“It almost seemed like you said something to him and he responded.”



“I’m good,” Mary laughed, “but I haven’t learned how to speak Grizzly.”

They both laughed and talked about the magnificent creatures that inhabit their beloved mountains as they finished the hike to the base camp. Their wilderness was filled with a large number of different animal species – carnivores, omnivores and herbivores – that maintained the delicate balance of nature. The dominant carnivores were the Mountain Lions and Wolves. There were also Coyote, Bobcat and Pine Martens. According to Mary there were signs of Wolverine moving into the area. The Wolverine, who cover extensive distances in their wandering, were known and studied north of them in Montana. Of course, they had Bears. Bears are omnivores.

While a Grizzly Bear can bring down a Moose and doesn’t hesitate to dig a Columbian Ground Squirrel out of the ground or go after a Marmot, its diet is still predominantly vegetarian. To round out and balance off the ecosystem, the area had a full complement of ungulates, lagomorphs, and rodents – Elk, Moose, Pika, and Marmot topped the list. Shinmasa would often watch the Moose eating in the shallow lakes at the foot of the mountains in the early evening. Herds of female Elk were abundant in the high subalpine meadows while the males were mostly heard but not seen. At least at rutting. The Marmots liked to sun themselves on large rocks at high elevations. That was always a good sign that there were no Mountain Lions or Bears around, and the tiny Pika kept well out of sight high up the mountains. It was exciting to see an Osprey swoop down from its nest high atop a dead fir tree to snatch a large fish from the lake below it, or to watch an American or Golden Eagle soaring high in the sky

looking for prey below. Their wilderness was indeed filled with marvelous creatures and abundant life.

It was getting dark as they approached. Being a gentleman, Shin offered his hand to Mary who was descending a rather tricky spot in the rocks. As their hands touched Shin had a sensation he couldn't explain. He looked at Mary who only smiled. She didn't show any sign of sharing his feelings. For him it was like an energy. It almost lifted him off the ground. It wasn't sensual yet it was filled with . . . well, the only word he could find was 'love'.

It took Shin a few minutes to gather the courage to ask Mary. “Did you feel that back there?”

“Feel what?” asked Mary. “Was there a tremor?”

“No,” said Shin now feeling foolish for even having asked. “No. Nothing.”

They returned to the base camp and joined the others in the usual pot luck. Of course they got teased about their bear encounter. It was a lovely evening with good friends and comrades whom all loved the mountains and the wilderness. They told stories and shared their adventures until the camp fire was a pile of embers. Then, filled with the elixir of good fellowship, all went to bed.



Hours later a dark figure entered Shin's tent. For quite some time the figure sat perfectly still next to the sleeping man. Then it reached out its hand and touched his forehead with a single finger. Shin did not awaken. No one saw, so no one remembered.

Over the next couple of days it seemed that it was always Mary Silva who accompanied Shin. The next morning the two of them set out toward a place called Spiny Ridge Peak where Shin took routine measurements. On the way they passed along a ridge above the south and west side of White Mountain Glacier. When they had first come into sight of the glacier Shin had stopped. Mary could see love in his eyes yet they were filled with tears. She started to say something but as he wiped a tear from his cheek she decided to remain quiet. He moved silently along the ridge turning north just below the peak of Mt. White. Most of the time between White Mountain and Spiny Ridge Peak they were on a narrow ridge from which they could look down in to deep valleys on both sides.

From the spot where Shin took his measurements on Spiny Ridge Peak it was over a thousand feet almost straight down into a bowl of lush green. The glacier was due south of them now and just below the glacier Mary could see a stream and two small lakes. Far down the valley on the southern ridge she could see more snow.

“Another glacier?” she asked, point toward the snow field to the southeast.

“No,” said Shin still staring at the glacier. “No, just an ancient snow field.”

“You are in great pain,” Mary said quietly.

“Yes,” Shin almost whispered. The tears began to roll freely. “You see that snow. Some of that snow is hundreds of years old, but there is less of it each year. I'm not just talking about the glacier. I'm talking about snow fields that never totally melt over the summer. They just keep accumulating snow. Or they did. But now many of these high snow fields are in danger of literally sliding down the mountain because the warmth is getting to bottom of the snowpack, creating ice and water and becoming slick. What happens when these snow fields are gone? People don't think it through. First there will be floods and lots of people will say 'how can we be in danger of drought when there's this much water?' It will flood because all of a sudden a tremendous amount of extra snow and ice is in an area where the snow melts each year. Once the floods pass there will be droughts reaching as far as the melt off of the snow field extended because there's not enough snow falling in the mountains and there's no snow field left to provide water when there isn't a snowy winter, and it just all dries up. And my glacier is melting. It has been here since the Ice Age but it will probably be gone in my life time.”

“Look at those mountains,” exclaimed Shin pointing to the panoramic vista before them. “Look at them. They're alive. They're bloody well alive yet people look at them and don't see life. I can't understand that. Even above the tree-line. Notice the subtle shades of green. There are small

flowers and grasses and even just lichen creating a plethora of colors up where people think it's just stone. Look around us,” Shin gestures toward the tundra around them. “If we aren't careful where we step it will take nature decades to replace what we destroy.” He dropped his head in sorrow.

“The argument down below,” Shin continued after a few moments of silence, “is that this is a natural phenomena. That's why I'm up here. Is it natural or is it the results of human pollution? So far my money is on human pollution. I'm looking at instruments thousands of feet above and many miles away from even a minor concentration of human life yet the readings look like I'm taking readings in the middle of at least a fair size town. It may not be all the result of humans but we humans could sure help by not contributing so extensively.”

There was nothing Mary could say. In fact, it was almost more than Mary could bear. She turned her head away from Shin and whispered “Me. Me ka kopo!”

“What?” asked Shin.

“Nothing.” Mary lied.

Standing there for what seemed ages, Shin suddenly came to life. “I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to bring you here to burden you with my issues.”

“I don't think they're just your issues,” Mary replied. “We're all effected.”

“I know, but it just seems like no one gives a damn except those of us who make our weekend pilgrimages up here.” Shin attempted a smile.

“I've just been weird this way all my life.”

“I know,” Mary said without thinking.

“What?”

“I said, I would have guessed.”

Shin went about taking his measurements. His backpack was filled with folding tripods, surveying equipment, GPS devices and other measuring tools. His tripod had a plum-bob hanging from directly under the plate to which a device was attached. It took Shin only a few moments to find a metal plate embedded in the ground. He put the point of the plum-bob directly above the metal plate.

“I put that here several years ago,” he told Mary. “that plate is screwed to the top of a two foot spike. The plate has the exact coordinates of this spot in case other researchers want to use the spot and don't have a GPS device. Also, this way there is no doubt that I'm at exactly the same location every time I take a measurement. My instruments are checked for accuracy at the beginning of every trip by an independent testing company and again after the trip. I don't want anyone getting away with saying that the glacier is shrinking because of my measurement technique or instruments.”

“You are definitely into this. I mean, you're going to prove it to the world,” said Mary.

“Truthfully, I'd love to be proven wrong. This is one hypothesis for which I'd just as soon not demonstrate any supporting evidence.” Shin took a moment to take a measurement then looked back up at Mary. “Unfortunately, I don't think I'm wrong. This is where I come to measure the glacier and snow fields. I have some air sampling instruments up here as well as at the Weather Cluster we visited yesterday and a place I call 'Watcher's Peak' just over there.” Shin pointed to another peak about a mile north-northeast of them. “Those little lakes are called upper and lower White Glacier Lakes and the stream is Eddy Creek. I have a water sampling station just down there where the creek starts to turn north. There's almost as much crap and pollution in the air up here as there is in most small Midwestern towns. And that stuff gets into the snow which ends up in those lakes and stream.”



S piny Ridge Peak was about three and a quarter miles from their base camp. Shin was much more talkative on the return trip. He stopped at a high spot along the ridge leading east from White Mountain Peak. The promontory was at 9,720 feet altitude and was their last look at Shin's glacier and the beautiful valley before they headed down the mountain side to base camp.

That evening the researchers sat around the campfire sharing their day's activities. The WSU students had gone back to the road and followed it around to Spruce Gulch Lake to get water samples and check for wild

life. Some of them had scouted out the eastern slope of Twin Peaks North Mountain. Twin Peaks North is about 10,200 feet high. It is, by far, the highest peak in the area. They had been studying the topo maps and noticed that, if they went a short distance south of the lake and were able to stay at about 8,800 feet, they could move around the east side of the mountain until they came to a place where they could ascend to the summit without climbing gear.

“What does that have to do with your research?” asked one of the French researchers named Adrien.

“Nothing,” responded one of the students.

“Then why do it?”

“Because it's there and we want to climb it.”

The French researcher, who was a very serious man in his fifties, shook his head good-naturedly while the rest of the group laughed.

Of course everyone was interested in Shin's measurements. It had been almost eight weeks since he was there last and a lot of hot weather had been recorded.

“I haven't had a chance to look at the weather and air data from Weather Cluster or Spiny Ridge, but there hasn't been as much change as I had feared,” reported Shin.

“I looked at some of my weather data. It was an average of almost 2% warmer throughout the past month. It just keeps going up,” offered the faculty member who was heading the WSU group.

“And the level of shit in the air goes up with it,” chimed in Trevor, the grad student from Berkeley.

“Is that a technical term?” joked one of the WSU students.



“Of course,” laughed Trevor, “and a shit-load is a measurement of an intolerable amount of shit.”

Everyone laughed. This was a time when they all could express their fears and frustrations without someone calling them geeks or nerds or environmentalists as though geeks, nerds and environmentalists are the dumbest creatures on the planet.

“I went down to your water sampling site,” said Jacques, the younger of the two French researchers. “I couldn't believe some of the stuff I found. It was trace, thankfully, but there were metals and compounds that you don't normally find around here and definitely don't want in your drinking water.”

The discussion went late. One by one each person said 'good-night' and made their way to their tents. Shin was sitting staring at the embers. Guess it was his job to put out the fire tonight. He looked up to see Mary still sitting quietly.

“I thought I was the last one up,” Shin smiled.

“You seemed so deep in thought,” said Mary.

“Always,” Shin smiled again. “that's my problem.”

The two poured water on the fire, said 'good-night' and went to their own tents. Shin poured a thimble from his hip flash and laid on top of his sleeping bag thinking about Mary. He hadn't spent time thinking about a woman for a long time, but Mary was different. She seemed to care and she was extremely intelligent. He really liked her, but he didn't think she was interested in him. 'Oh, well,' he thought. 'That's the story of my love life.' He knocked back the last little sip of whiskey, crawled into his sleeping bag and went to sleep.

Some hours later, while Shin was in a deep sleep, the dark figure again visited Shin's tent. As before it sat perfectly still as Shin slept. But this

time a whisper could be heard if one were there to hear it. “Me, joang ke tseba?”



Time at the base camp went quickly for Shin. He had gathered data from each of his sampling stations and had enjoyed Mary's company in doing so. He had enjoyed her company so much that he failed to notice that she never seemed to go off and do any research on her own. In the evenings the two of them would talk long after the others had retired. The WSU group returned to Seattle on Sunday leaving only five of them. Shin needed three full days to gather all of his data, so he wasn't leaving until Tuesday. Each night, after everyone was asleep, the lone dark figure would slip into Shin's tent and just sit.

By ten o'clock Tuesday morning Shin's truck was packed and he was ready to leave. He turned the key and the big truck came to life. He had a Ram 1500 4x4 with the 3.0L ecodiesel V-6 engine. Although it had less horsepower it had almost twice the torque, a lot better gas mileage and was significantly more environmentally friendly. Shin sat listening to the engine and staring out the front window but he wasn't seeing anything. He was thinking . . . thinking about Mary, whom he had left a few minutes before standing just on the other side of the creek about eight hundred feet from the parking lot. If he backed up to the east side of the parking lot he would be able to see her.

The thought of how silly it was to back the full distance of the parking lot just to get another glimpse of a woman, and perhaps wave at her, did

flit through Shin's mind, but all it did was flit. He put the truck into reverse and headed straight back.

There, near the little footbridge over the creek, was where they had said good-bye. But she was not there. What a fool he had been. Why hadn't he at least attempted to give her a peck on the cheek. The worst thing that could have happened would have been that she would tell him straight out that she wasn't interested.

As he looked at the spot where she had stood watching him leave he noticed the large oak tree. He hadn't remembered that there. Strange how your mind plays tricks on you. Things you pass each day and don't notice suddenly become the obvious. He put the truck in drive and headed down the mountain toward the highway. It was just over five miles to Twin Peaks Road where he would turn left and follow the Challis Road to the highway. It was a long five miles for Shin and all he could think of was what a fool he had been and how was he going to get another chance.

That's when it hit him. He not only had not taken any risk in showing Mary his feelings, but he hadn't even asked for a telephone number or email address. He had no way to communicate with her. His anger with himself grew by the minutes and by the time he had reached the Twin Peaks Road he was deluging himself with less than complimentary descriptions. He hit the gas pedal so hard when he turned onto Challis Road that the back end broke traction and swung around to his right. He corrected and continued his tirade. By the time Challis Road crossed Eddy Creek, Shin was so upset that he had to pull over. What was he going to do?

He could just take a chance that they would meet again at the research camp, but he knew that was foolish. The only real option was to turn around and go get a phone number before he got any farther away. He

cranked the steering wheel as far as it would go and spun the big pickup around.

The parking area was only about eight miles from where he had stopped. He figured that he had wasted about fifteen minutes going down the mountain and another fifteen returning. She shouldn't have gone too far in half an hour. He consoled himself that even if she had left camp he could leave a note on her tent and ask her to call or email him. Shin spent the trip trying to think of clever things to say when he saw her. He pulled the Ram right up to the path, jumped out and started jogging toward the base camp.

It was close to a mile and a half from the parking area to the base camp but Shin made it in slightly over a half hour. He was breathing hard when he arrived and gasped for air when all he saw were the tents of the two Frenchmen and Trevor. Mary's tent was not there. Trevor was sitting by the campfire.

"Trevor!" Shin shouted. "Trevor! Where is Mary?"

"Didn't she leave with you?" Trevor looked totally puzzled. "Are you okay?"

"I'm just winded and totally disgusted with myself," said Shin looking around in dismay. "She walked out with me, but she didn't have her gear with her."

"Are you sure?" Trevor was beginning to show concern. "The two of you left together and I haven't seen her since."

"I left her by the footbridge. Right by that big oak tree. But I would have sworn she didn't have her gear with her."

"Big oak tree? What big oak tree?" Trevor was now on his feet. "Are you sure you're okay?"

“Yeah, I think so.” Shin was beginning to doubt himself.

“You're scaring me, man,” said Trevor. “Maybe I'd better call the Rangers and get you to a doctor.”

“Naw,” Shin was resigned. “I just screwed up. I really wanted to see Mary again and I let her get away without even getting her email.”

“Bummer!”

“Now I feel like a real idiot.” Shin turned to start back to his truck.

“Thanks, Trevor. Sorry I bothered you,” he said over his shoulder.

“It's alright.”

“Hey,” Shin stopped and turned toward Trevor. “if you see her, would you give her my email.”

“Sure thing, buddy.”

The walk back to the truck took Shin almost an hour. He stopped at the large oak tree and thought about Mary standing there. He couldn't visualize her with her camping gear, but then again, he had had no interest in her camping gear, just her. He thought about her smile. It was so gentle and sweet. Her eyes were a rich brown and her skin was like . . . well, Shin thought of her skin as he looked at the oak tree . . . like a finely polished piece of oak. He laughed to himself. Well, the color of a finely polished piece of oak. She was beautiful.

The drive back to Boulder was long and somewhat frustrating. Every time Shin started to think about his work and his data he caught himself thinking about what Mary did or said when they were collecting the data. Most of the drive was filled with self-recrimination.

It took Shin several days before he started getting anything done but by the beginning of the next week he was again deep into his research. There was good reason. There were some very strange things.

The samples from Watcher's Peak had a very high concentration of putrescine and cadaverine the night Shin had arrived. Putrescine and cadaverine are diamines found in rotting flesh. They are chemically very similar. Putrescine's systematic name is butane-1, 4-diamine because it has four carbon atoms between two amines, while Cadaverine's systematic name is pentane-1,5-diamine because it has five carbon atoms. They could both be called cleaners and eventually end up, in the living body, to contribute a little bit to the smell of urine. Most people who have encountered a badly decomposed animal body have no problem remembering and identifying the smell of putrescine and cadaverine. The concentrations spiked about 2am and then dissipated. If these were coming from the decomposing body of an animal, they should have seen the carcass and the smell should have lingered for some time. There is no way that it came from urine. The only possible explanation was that the carcass was dragged away during the night. That was extremely unusual, but that's something with which Mary could have helped.

Shin was ready to gather his things and return to the research camp when he remembered his Mother's birthday. It was her 75th. birthday and Shin had promised to be there. He would have to go to the camp after he got back from Seattle.



**B**arako, or Rose Takeyo as she was known by her friends, was enjoying being surrounded by her children. She always enjoyed having her children around and, as they were older and had children and grandchildren of their own, it was becoming more and more difficult. She was waiting anxiously for her youngest, Shinmasa.

The Takeyo home was at the end of a little, unnamed spur off of 178th. Lane NE in Seattle. The house set up on the side of a hill above the Lake Sammamish Parkway and had a great view of the Lake. It was very Japanese having been built by his father just after arriving from Japan. Barako was sitting in the garden with her children when Shin arrived.

He bowed and showed traditional Japanese respect to his Mother and then, in good American fashion, went to her and gave her a kiss.

Barako took one look at her son and began to speak rapidly in Japanese. The only thing anyone could make out was 'akai ryu' which she repeated again and again. She held tightly to Shin and spoke directly to him.

“What is she saying?” demanded the others.

“She's just excited to see me,” Shin tried to cover up the shock he was feeling.

“What is akai ryu?”

“Oh, that's just a naughty boy because I didn't tell her I was coming,” Shin said trying to calm his mother, smile and cover up his own confusion at the same time.

“Yes,” said Barako now calm and smiling at the others. “Shinmasa had not told me that he would be here. He never makes it to my parties. He's always off somewhere doing research.”

There was some skepticism among Shin's siblings but Barako appeared to have pulled it off. At least it was enough to take their minds off akai ryu and change the subject. Barako didn't let go of her son's hand and would pat it and whisper “subarashi” which means “wonderful”. Occasionally she would look at him with admiration and say “Watashi no musuko, akai ryu.” “My son, red dragon.”

It would be several hours before Shin had the opportunity to talk to his Mother privately. She was sipping tea late in the evening. Only his sister from Los Angeles was still at the house and she was in her room on the telephone with her husband. Shinmasa approached his Mother with traditional respect.

“Sit down, my son.” Barako said in Japanese. She smiled and repeated with great pride, “Watashi no musuko, akai ryu.”

“I must talk to you about that,” Shin started, also speaking in his Mother's native tongue. “I don't know what you mean.”

Barako looked at her son for a long time. Could he really have no idea?

“Do you not know that you are a red dragon?” she asked.

“What do you mean I'm a red dragon?”

“I knew as soon as you walked through the door. I could see the dragon in your posture and your bow.”

“I still don't understand,” Shin confided. “When I was a child you told me stories of dragons and how they have protected people for thousands of years, but how am I a dragon? Is it because of my work ... because I want to help and protect people?”

“So you do not know.”

“No,” said Shin. “I have no idea!”

“You know that one of the greatest blessings you can give a friend is that one of their children will become a dragon.”

“Yes,” said Shin, “but . . .”

Barako interrupted him. “When you were a new born baby we befriended a Japanese immigrant who called himself Mahotsukai no Ryunake. That means ‘the magician who is a friend of the dragon’. He was a kind man



and did a lot of gardening work for us. Much of this beautiful formal garden was his creation. One day he said that he must move on but wanted to give a blessing before he left. He put his hand on your head and said 'may you become a red dragon and save the people.' Since that isn't dissimilar to any other dragon blessing, we just smiled and thanked him.”

“That was very nice of him,” said Shin.

“He also left a gift. It is a jo with the words akai ryu carved in it above a dragon. I have kept it in the garden tool shed he built.” Barako motioned toward a small tool shed hidden among the bushes. “Please get it for me, Shinmasa.”

Shinmasa did as his Mother requested and soon returned with a jo just as she described. He had studied jojutsu, the martial art of wielding a jo, and gave the old jo a spin as he returned to where his Mother sat.

“Today, when you walked into the garden, I knew that the blessing had come true. You are indeed akai ryu, a red dragon, and that jo was meant for you.”

“But how do you know, Mother. I haven't changed. I look the same and I think the same.”

Barako just shook her head. She could see the red dragon sitting beside her, but the red dragon didn't recognize himself. “Has anything different happened?”

“No,” said Shin. Then he thought of Mary. “Well, I did meet a young lady whom I would very much like to get to know, but I failed to get either her telephone number or email, so I'll probably never see her again.”

“Is she Japanese?”

“No.” Mary’s beautiful face filled Shin’s imagination. “Her skin is like coffee with milk. I think she must be African-American.”

“Oh,” said Barako. She didn’t really care that the girl was not Japanese. But had she been Japanese she might have recognized akai ryu.

The two talked for some time about dragons, life and love. Barako could sense her son’s sadness. She had never known him to care for a woman so deeply. There had been Haruko, but she had actually been a bit shallow and never really appreciated Shinmasa’s work or dedication. Barako had hated the horrible pain her son suffered when Haruko left, but deep inside she was thankful. If they had married, it would have been a horrible disaster.

On the flight back to Boulder Shinmasa could not get his Mother’s determination that he was a dragon out of his mind. Dragon or not, he was happy that she was proud of him. Now he needed to turn his attention back to the anomaly at Watcher’s Peak. He would go there as soon he could get his instruments calibrated and certified.



**S**hinmasa’s heart sank when he walked up to the research base camp and Mary’s tent was not there. He had no idea why he should have expected it to be there. It was just that he wanted it to be there. He wanted her to be there.

'You've got to get it together, man,' he said to himself. 'You have work to do and you're not getting it done this way.' Shin picked a good spot and pitched his tent. Adrien and Jacques were there, as was Trevor. He could

almost count on them. Actually he wondered if they ever left. There were also three or four people from the University of Idaho's Environmental Science Department and one lone person from Northland College in Ashland, Wisconsin.

Shin knew Northland. He had lectured there once. It was probably one of the top, if not the top, environmental science schools in the country. He remembered how impressed he was that environment studies was not just a major but was a required part of all the college's curriculum. He wondered what this student was studying.

“Hey, man. How's it goin’?” Trevor interrupted Shin's thoughts about Northland.

“Very well,” replied Shin looking up at the ruddy complexed young man who stood almost above him. Trevor was in his late twenties and was frantically trying to finish the data gathering part of his doctoral research on the effect of global warming on *Ochotona princeps* or American Pika. The Pika is a small animal that lives in the high Rocky Mountains. They appear to be driven higher and higher by global warming. Since the Rocky Mountains in Idaho and western Montana are among the lowest mountains in the range, it is a perfect place to see what happens when these poor creatures run out of mountain.

“Did you find Mary?” asked Trevor.

“No,” said Shin plopping down on his bottom and crossing his legs. “I really blew it, Trevor.”

“Maybe she'll show up here again,” suggested Trevor in a very positive manner.

“As they say, 'we live in hope.’” Shin did not look very hopeful.

“Boy, don't I know that.” Trevor looked concerned.

“What's wrong?”

“Awe, I'm just worried that I won't be able to get enough data before my deadline.”

“What deadline?”

“If I can't produce enough data to keep my committee happy, I might be forced to scrap the entire project.” Trevor looked totally lost. “I don't know what I'd do. I'd be back at square one. I believe in my project. It isn't just a doctoral dissertation. It's my life's work. I've spent more of my life over the past four years out on this mountain than I have at home. This should be my home address. I don't think I could handle being forced to start over.”

“What will it take to make your committee happy?” It was Mary. Shin and Trevor spun around as the young woman approached.

“Am I glad to see you!” Shin exclaimed. Then he wondered if he had gone a bit overboard.

“I'm glad to see you too,” Mary dropped her eyes a bit.

“About my committee,” Trevor interjected. “They don't feel that I have nearly enough data and I can't say for sure exactly what will make them happy.”

“What if I told you that I know there are some Pika making nests on the northeast slope of Twin Peaks North?” Mary smiled.

“You wouldn't kid a poor desperate grad student, would you?”

“No. I have it from good sources.”

“Those being . . . ?”

“How about snowfinches?”

“Awe, snowfinches!” exclaimed Trevor. The snowfinch is known to share nesting with the Pika.

“Start across the ridge between White Mountain and Twin Peaks North. When you start to come out of the tree-line on the Twin Peaks North side you will see the steep rocky slope on the east side of the ridge. A large Douglas Fir will be just about the last tree before the barren climb to Twin Peaks North. Sit down under that tree and be quiet. I'll guarantee you'll get all the data you need.” Mary patted Trevor on the head.

Trevor smiled. “Do you know how many times I've been across that ridge?”

“But have you ever stopped and watched?”

“Well, no,” Trevor conceded. “But how do you know? How can you guarantee?”

“This is my field,” said Mary. “Just trust me.”

Trevor stood thinking for a moment. Finally he said, “Thanks. It's definitely worth a try. Can I ...”

“The Douglas Fir,” Mary said and laughed as Trevor wandered off muttering “the Douglas Fir. Just that Douglas Fir. No other tree. Gotta find that Douglas Fir tree.”

Shinmasa had been watching and admiring Mary during this exchange. She was so beautiful, he thought. She was so alive. He couldn't find the words to describe the sense of life he felt with Mary.

“That was very nice of you,” Shin said with very sincere admiration in his voice. “I don't know how you can be so certain the Pica are there, but if you're right, you will have saved his research.”

“He cares about the Pica,” said Mary. “Not many people care about them.”

“Not many people know about them,” Shin laughed, “but, yes, he cares about the Pica and what they can tell the people of the world.”

“Yes,” Mary smiled, “and what they can tell. But what about you?”

“Oh, I'm just . . . .” For a moment Shin couldn't even think why he was there. Was he so love-struck by this woman? “Oh, yes. I found a very curious anomaly up by Watcher's Peak. There was a very high concentrations of Putrescine and Cadaverine. I need to check the data collected after we were there a few weeks ago. How are you doing?” He didn't pause long enough for her to answer. “I tried to come back and get your email address but you were already gone.” Shinmasa wondered if he looked like he felt. He felt like a silly boy just hitting puberty who couldn't talk straight in the presence of a pretty girl.

“I'm sorry I missed you,” Mary said. “When was the high reading?”

Shin was caught off by the fact that Mary had completely ignored his obvious admiration of her and had focused on the anomaly he had observed. It took him a moment to reply.

“It spiked about 2am. Would an animal drag off a carcass at that hour?”

“That does seem strange.”

“What made it stand out was that there was no build up.”

“What do you mean?” Mary asked.

“If it was an animal carcass that was rotting, the levels would have gradually risen. That didn't happen. There was just suddenly a spike in the levels and then they were gone.”

“That is odd, isn't it? What do you propose?”

“I'm going to see what the samples show since then. I don't know what I expect or want to find. I just hate not being able to explain it.”

“May I help?” Mary asked contritely.

“Sure,” said Shin. “If you really want to.”

“Your work is very important,” said Mary, “and I do enjoy going along if I don't bother you.”

“No, I enjoy your company.” Shin laughed. “But please don't let me leave without getting your telephone number and email.”

“I won't.”

It was too late in the day to make the almost five-mile trek to Watcher's Peak and get back before dark, so Shin gladly spent the time hiking around the lake with Mary. She knew every plant and could tell stories about them that made them come alive to Shin.



Late that night, just before midnight, the lone dark figure sat on a high promontory well down the valley from the base camp. The figure didn't move but kept its head near the ground.

“Mother,” said the figure in a strange language. “is the man, Shinmasa, the one? Everything I see and sense tells me that he is Akai Ryu but he gives no indication that he knows and I haven't seen the sign.”

A gentle woman's voice replied. “Your senses are good. Don't doubt them. He may not know that he is Akai Ryu. But you believe he is.”

“Yes. I felt it when he touched me. I sense it when he talks. And now he's saying that his scientific devices are picking up Putrescine and Cadaverine.”

“Bafu Nama!”

“Yes. And he said that his device sensed him about 2am.”

“Lefu Sefefo has sent him to kill the one.”

“I have sat with the man called Shinmasa every night to protect him.”

“That is good but we must act. We can't wait for him to discover he is Akai Ryu.”

“Yes, Mother. What must I do?”

“There is one way. He seems very enamored with you. Is he in love with you?”

The lone dark figure sat as though listening. All that could be heard were the sounds of nature but the figure seemed to understand. With a quiet “e, 'Me” it folded its arms and disappeared.

That night the figure again sat at Shinmasa's side while not far away the air was filled with the putrid smell of rotting flesh.



**T**hat next morning Shin was up bright and early. He had almost finished his coffee when Mary crawled out of her tent.

“Is it morning already?” she asked smiling at Shin.

“Yes, and it's a beautiful morning.”

“Wow. Are you full of energy.” Mary laughed.

“I want to get to Watcher's Point to get that data right away.”



“Why the rush. You can't analyze it until you get back to the lab.”

“Au contraire mon ami,” Shin was in a jovial mood and enjoying this. “I brought an analyzer with me. It has been calibrated and certified, and it is ready to go. I have a power converter in the truck to run it. Ta-dah!”

Mary laughed. “May I at least get a cup of coffee?”

“Anything my fair lady desires,” Shin said before he thought. Once the words were out of his mouth and he realized what he had said he froze in terror of what Mary might say.

“My, aren't we being gallant,” Mary teased.

“Seriously, what would you like for breakfast?”

After a quick breakfast of coffee, fruit and cheese, the two headed toward Watcher's Peak as the rest of the camp was just waking up. Shin decided that he might as well take the reading from Spiny Ridge for the same period. He was anxious to run the analysis, so they decided to follow the ridge between Spiny Ridge Peak and White Mountain to a spot where there was a much less steep slope that they could follow down to the road. It would bring them out on the road about a half mile above where the truck was parked.

It was mid-afternoon before they arrived at the truck. Shin had taken the time to put the camper shell on the truck before he left. The shell turned the truck into a mobile lab. Just to be safe Shin started the engine before plugging the analyzer into the power converter that was hooked to his 12 volt system.

“This is strange,” Shin exclaimed looking at the stream of data being produced by the analyzer.

“What's wrong,” asked Mary.

“This shows the Putrescine and Cadaverine at Watcher's Peak every night about the same time during this period. Then there's a gap with no traces at all, and then it showed up again last night, but this time at Spiny Ridge and not Watcher's Peak.”

“That is strange,” said Mary. “When was that period?”

“It was when we were here last.” Shin sat looking very puzzled. This was beyond weird. He had a strange phenomena that only seemed to occur when Mary and he were in the area. There was no explanation.

Shin looked around the camper. “There's a notebook with all sorts of wind and weather data. I must have left it in the cab. It's probably on the jump-seat behind the driver's seat. Would you mind getting it for me while I run this again?”

Mary climbed out of the camper, opened the driver's door of the truck, and pushed the driver's seat forward to gain access to the jump seat. She saw the notebook. She also saw the jo that Shin had brought home from Seattle.

She picked up the jo. At the top was inscribed “Akai Ryu” in Japanese characters. Just below was a dragon. With a sigh of relief she held the jo above her head and said “Me, o ile a ke e mong.” With the jo and notebook in hand she got back into the camper. Shin looked up.

“Where did you get this?” she asked holding out the jo.

“Oh, it's a Japanese thing,” Shin laughed.

“What do you mean, a Japanese thing?” she gently insisted.

“A Japanese immigrant, whom my parents befriended, left that with them.”

“Why?”

“You see, Mary,” Shin felt a little embarrassed to tell her, “in Asia one of the greatest blessings you can give a friend is to wish that one of their children will be a dragon. Dragons are good mythical creatures in Asia. The man left the jo and said that he wished I would become a red dragon. My Mother just gave me the jo last weekend.”

“Was the man's name Mahotsukai no Ryunake?” asked Mary.

Shin stood frozen. How would she know the name of a Japanese immigrant who passed through Seattle almost thirty years ago?

“Yes,” he said. “How do you know?”

“I know Ryunake,” Mary said softly. “I spoke with him not three weeks ago. We need to talk . . . talk seriously.”

Shin just stood looking. He didn't know what to say.

“A great evil spirit named Lefu Sefefo is coming.” Mary began. “He has no other objective than to destroy the earth - to turn it into a lifeless ball floating in space. He has already sent his servant and henchman, Bafu Nama, to try to destroy you. Bafu Nama is rotting death. That's why your instruments picked up the Putrescine and Cadaverine at Watcher's Peak the nights you were here. He couldn't try to kill you because I sat by your side. I already believed that you are the red dragon. Last night he came closer but I was there. Ryunake told us that there is a red dragon - akai ryu - who can defeat Lefu Sefefo. He said that he had left his jo as a sign. You have his jo. You are the red dragon.”

Shin slumped down on a stool. “My Mother called me akai ryu. But I can't be. I have no powers. I'm no different than I ever was. I'm not magical. I'm not a dragon, and I can't save anyone.”

Mary could see the struggle Shinmasa was experiencing. He had grown up in a culture that believed in dragons and spirits but he had become a scientist in a culture that believed in almost nothing. What a horrible

conflict. But he was their hope. He was the hope for those who believed and those who didn't believe, for those who cared and those who didn't care. Everything pointed to Shinmasa being akai ryu so they had no time to gently deal with his conflict.

“Do you trust me?” Mary asked.

“Yes,” said Shin looking to Mary for a resolution to the battle that was raging inside him but he feared that she was going to make it worse by insisting that he was a mythical and powerful red dragon.

“My name is not Mary. It is actually Moru Khosatsana, and I'm going to take you where I can show you who you are.”

Moru reached out her hand toward Shin. With a look of total fear and confusion he took her hand. As their hands touched there was a brief flash and they were standing on a mountain that Shin did not recognize. Next to them was a precipice that was so high it made Shin dizzy to look down.

“I believe that you are akai ryu,” said Moru gently. “I know you don't believe it.”

Shin shook his head. He couldn't believe it. He couldn't believe that he had just been magically transported to some high mountain. Some chemical, some drug must have been in the water when he made coffee. He must be experiencing a drug induced delusional episode. This just couldn't be happening. But for some reason he still trusted the woman who now said her name was Moru.

“You trust me?” asked Moru again. Shin again nodded the affirmative.

“You don't want anything to die, do you?” she said.

“No,” said Shin. “Protect and do good to all life, and if you can't do good, do no harm.” Shin recited the Buddhist first rule of life.

“Do you have any feelings for me?” Had anyone else been there, they might have noticed a blush come to Moru's dark skin. She realized that she had feelings for this man and to ask him this caused her to acknowledge those feelings.

Without hesitation Shin said, “Yes. I haven't stopped thinking about you since we met.” He paused a moment. In the surrealistic setting it didn't seem at all unthinkable to say, “I think I'm in love with you.”

“Then you won't let me die.”

“What?!”

“Then you won't let me die.” Moru leaned forward and kissed him gently on the lips. Then, turning toward the cliff, she jumped.

It was everything Shinmasa's brain could do to comprehend what had just happened. He was struggling. He was struggling to stand. He was struggling to think, to know what to do. She was falling. Falling. What could he do? She had said 'you won't let me die'. He had already failed because he was helpless. She had jumped. Why did she jump? She was falling. Falling. If he had had some warning he might have held her and kept her away from the edge, but he had no warning. Time was moving in slow motion. Why was it moving in slow motion? He could see her face looking up at him, her arms outstretched. She was looking for him to save her. She was falling. Falling. She believed in him and now she was going to die because she believed in him. He cursed himself. Then he heard his Mother calling him - “Akai Ryu”. She believed in him. Moru believed in him.

Why was he doing this? What was happening? He must save her. Shinmasa took one step and leapt into space. As he fell he could see that he was getting closer to Moru. He could see her face smiling up at him. How could she smile? They were going to die. As he got closer to her he

reached out to take hold of her. That's when he noticed his hands or what should have been his hands. Instead of hands he saw claws. What? There was no time. If he was going to die he wanted to die holding her. The claws gently wrapped around Moru's body. He felt a powerful upward thrust. Their descent stopped and slowly they began to rise.

Smiling, Moru put her arms around Shin's neck. With her head close to his she said, "You are my akai ryu. You are my red dragon."

"What is happening?" Shinmasa demanded after gently setting Moru on the ground. "This isn't delusion. It is hallucination. What is happening?"

"You're okay," Moru tried to comfort Shin. "You became akai ryu to save me."

"This is impossible," Shin insisted. "I can't be a dragon. Dragons don't exist. This must be a hallucination."

"It is not an hallucination." Moru realized that she was not going to convince Shinmasa that what had happened was real. "Here," she offered him what appeared to be small yellow berries, "this will help you relax and you can go to sleep."

"What is it?"

"It's just soybean kernels. They are rich in niacin and can help you relax."

Shinmasa ate a handful as Moru stroked his head between his eyes. He could feel himself relaxing.

"Don't worry," Moru said softly, "we'll work through this together." He nodded agreement as she continued to stroke his head. "You can go to sleep and we can talk when you wake up." She continued to stroke. Soon he was asleep.

She looked around the mountain peak upon which they had landed. She needed to rest too but she was afraid of Bafu Nama. There really was no

easy way to sneak up on them and they were hopefully far away from where Bafu Nama might be looking. She had to rest. Holding out her hand a blanket of green covered the sleeping dragon. She curled up against his chest and fell asleep.

**M**oru sat up as the world was turning that ethereal blue that can only be seen moments before the splendor of dawn. Shinmasa was still in his dragon form and sleeping peacefully. She reached out and stroked Shinmasa's head. He stirred.

“Good morning,” she said as she saw an eye open.

“Good morning,” replied Shinmasa. “Where are we?”

“I don't know,” Moru responded truthfully.

Shinmasa started to get up. That's when he realized that he was still a dragon.

“Before you get upset again,” Moru pleaded, “please try to stay calm. I can explain and I will answer all your questions.”

Shinmasa didn't say anything but paced the mountain peak like a caged animal except instead of bars there were steep cliffs in every direction. “I guess I don't have any choice,” Shinmasa said somewhat reluctantly.

“First of all you are not hallucinating. This is real, and I really wish that there had been some other way for you to find out, but you and the entire world are in grave danger and I had to make you believe.”

“Didn't work, did it?” snapped Shinmasa.

“Well, partially. You did take on the form of a dragon and save me. Now I just have to convince you that it is real. What questions can I answer? What will convince you?”

“Am I stuck like this now?”

“No. There are many breeds of dragons and there are two groups within each breed. There are those who are born as dragons and will remain in their dragon form their entire lives. Then there are those who are born as humans with the ability to change forms between dragon and human known as kawizate dragons.

The kawizate dragons developed many centuries ago when a man of magic successfully transformed himself into a dragon. You are a kawizate dragon. All you have to do is focus on the form you want to take.”

Shinmasa closed his eyes for a few moments. Opening them he looked at himself. “Didn't work.”

“It's going to take some practice,” laughed Muro.

“So while I'm trying to turn back into a human, tell me who you are. Tell me about this guy Lefu, and why the hell he wants to destroy the world. And definitely tell me how a nerdy geophysicist like me is going to stop him even if I can become a dragon.” Shinmasa still had a bit of a pout in his voice.

“Anything else?” Muro teased.

“Yes,” Shinmasa smiled, “you can tell me why am I here?”

“Last night . . . .” Muro started.

“No,” Shinmasa interrupted, “not why am I *here*, but why *am* I here? The ultimate philosophical question. I might as well throw that in while I'm asking the impossible.” He smiled and tried again to return to his human form. No luck.

“I can't answer that last one, but I can answer the rest of your questions,” said Muro. “This guy, as you call Lefu Sefefo, is a spirit. His name means



'death storm'. Me Tlhaho, the spirit of all nature and queen of the spirits, had made Lefu the spirit of death. It was not a punishment or demeaning. She felt it was a very important spirit role and meant for him to help all living creatures to understand and accept death as a part of the cycle of life. Unfortunately Lefu Sefefo became jealous of the other spirits who got to deal with beautiful things like mountains and oceans.

He himself saw death as ugly and mean instead of a peaceful transition, so that's how he became. He was soon absorbing the fear and anger of all creatures and turning that to his power. Then he realized that the human animal has a unique ability and propensity toward hatred, cruelty and evil. Fear and anger are very natural. Fear is the basis of the primitive brain's fight-or-flight mechanism for all creatures and anger is a part of that response even though it is more prevalent in higher order of animals. But hatred, cruelty and evil are not a part of fight-or-flight. Even though the lioness is seen as a 'killing machine' does not make her cruel or evil. She hunts and kills to feed the pride. Nothing more. Nothing less. Humans, however, kill because they enjoy killing, hate the one they kill or they are simply being malevolent. Only humans hate. One of the higher order primates may have a violent reaction toward another but it is not hatred. It is based upon instinct or learned behavior not an emotion.”

“Yes, I understand all that.”

“Well, Lefu Sefefo takes all that anger, hatred, cruelty and evil and turns it into power. The more anger, hatred and cruelty he can create among the humans, the more powerful he becomes.”

“I understand how tyrants, terrorist and even your everyday politicians can create emotional power through anger, hatred, and cruelty, but how does he turn it into physical power?”

“He's a spirit.”

“A spirit?”

“Yes, a non-physical entity that is made up of the spirit, essence or energy of that to which it is associated.”

“That was clear as mud,” Shinmasa grunted, trying again to change into a human.

“I am Moru. That actually means 'forest'. I am a spirit.” Moru paused. “I am the second daughter of Me Tlhaho. I draw my energy and magic, my very being, from the oneness of all plants and the reason for my existence is to protect plants and maintain the unity of their spirit with the spirit of all living things - Me Tlhaho. Each of my sisters draws their being from that to which they are one - Metsia from water, Thabeng from the earth itself, Phoofolo from animals, and Moea from the air. We exist because of and for that to which we are one. By maintaining the unity of our spirit with Me Tlhaho we maintain the oneness of all things, including our oneness with the universe.”

“Wow,” said Shinmasa. “So Lefu Sefefo is one of these spirits gone bad.”

“Yes. I guess that just about sums him up.”

“Can spirits die?”

“I guess so,” Moru pondered the question for a while before answering. During her pause Shinmasa tried again to transform without success. “If that to which we owe our existence and for which we exist were to perish, then we would perish.”

“Why doesn't Me Tlhaho just take away his powers, or why don't you all gang up on him and stop him?”

“I wish it were that simple. Me Tlhaho can't take away his powers. It comes from his oneness with the essence of hatred, cruelty and evil. To take away his power Me Tlhaho would have to take away all hatred,

cruelty and evil in the world, or at least most of it. And don't think we haven't tried. There have been many, many people like Shakyamuni, Joshua bar Joseph, Francis, Tenzin Gyatso, Mahatma Gahdhi, Aung San Suu Kyi, Betty Williams, Mother Theresa, Thich Naht Hanh, and, right in your own country, Martin Luther King. Literally hundreds and hundreds of marvelous humans over the millennium. We thought we had something going when we had an entire generation of North American humans working for peace, harmony, and love. But it seems that Lefu can always get a war or riot going because humans have such a strong belief that all wrong requires retaliation of equal or greater force.”

Shinmasa was thinking about his own humanity which he now shared with a dragon. He was fragile compared to his dragon form, but he did share his sense of kindness, peace and harmony with the dragon. Shinmasa had never believed that dragons were real but thought of them as a symbol. To Shinmasa the dragon had always represented strength, courage and protection of others. He had always admired that and wished . . . . that was it. Shinmasa relaxed, shut his eyes and in a moment he was sitting there butt naked in his human form.

Moru could not help but to laugh. Shinmasa gave her an angry look. “I'm sorry,” Moru said as she laughed, “your clothes are lying in shreds where you transformed.”

“This has got to be hard on the clothing budget.”

“Most kawizate dragons have worn an outer garment that could be removed quickly and they'd go back and get it when possible.” Moru was still laughing. “I can give you a fig leaf.”

“Very funny.” Shinmasa wasn't laughing.

“I'm sorry. Transform into a dragon, we'll go back to your truck, and you can get some clothes to put on when you transform back to your human form.”

“Won't people see me?”

“Not very likely. You will be as invisible as you can possibly be.”

“How's that?”

“You will take advantage of the fact that the human brain receives one hundred million internal and external signals every second. The brain has to filter all that. What you remember and how you react to a particular signal is dependent upon your previous experience and how your brain interpreted that experience. If you never experienced a dragon, never saw a dragon and don't believe that they exist, you will not see the dragon fly over.”

“There are those who say that the natives who first encountered Columbus never saw his ships because they could not comprehend such a thing,” said Shinmasa. “Evidently a shaman finally notice the movement of the water around the ships. I don't know if that's true, but it sounds like what you're saying.”

“Exactly.”

It took Shinmasa only two tries to transform into akai ryu. Moru decided to stay in human form and ride on his back to help guide the way. Once at the truck and changed both into human form and clothes Shinmasa asked, “now what?”

“I think we need to get your camping gear packed into the truck, find a place to leave the truck that won't trigger a nation-wide search for you, and then find a place where we can hold up while you learn to be a dragon. My sister, Thabeng, can help with that.”

“What's her specialty?”

“She the mountain spirit.”

They arrived at the base camp. There was a large group. There were two university groups and a half dozen regulars.

“Oh, God, man, where've you been?” demanded Trevor. “I was worried about you when you didn't come back last night and then this place has been a madehouse with all these undergrads. And. . . .”

Shin interrupted him, “I'm sorry I worried you. We got a little too far away and it wasn't safe to travel at night, so . . . .”

“Sure,” this time Trevor interrupted Shin. Grinning, he looked back and forth at Shin and Moru, “I understand.”

“It wasn't . . . .” Shin stopped when he saw Moru shake her head and just returned Trevor's grin.

Trevor was constantly under foot as Shinmasa and Moru tried to pack up his camping equipment, and a number of the undergraduate students had to stop by and pay homage to the acclaimed Dr. Takeyo. But finally the two were headed back down the trail toward the truck. They had honestly told Trevor that they were pushing farther into the wilderness. Shinmasa had said that it was to get as physically far away from human developments as possible.

When they were well out of sight of the camp Moru took one last look around and said rather loudly, “Thabeng Moea, ka kopo tla. Ke hloka Tou.”

Shinmasa looked at her. She said, “I just asked my sister, Thabeng, to join us.”



They hadn't gone far when there was a swirl of vapor replaced by a tall woman who was the color of a red clay. Her hair almost matched her skin but her eyes were black as coal. She was dressed like a hiker in the 1920s - nickers, high boots that laced all the way up to the nickers, a quarter-zip pullover over a plain cotton blouse, topped with a cloche style hat. It was all in earth colors.

"Thabeng, it's the twenty-first century not the 1920s," Moru shook her head, laughed and then stepped forward to embrace her sister.

Then making introductions, "Thabeng, this is Takeyo Shinmasa the akai ryu. Shinmasa, this is my sister, Thabeng." As he had been programmed from childhood, Shinmasa put his hands together and bowed from the waist. Thabeng likewise put her hands together and bowed smiling broadly.

"He's gorgeous," exclaimed Thabeng. Shinmasa blushed deeply.

Moru again stood shaking her head and laughing at her sister. "He can hear you, Thabeng."

"Oh, wasn't I speaking moea lefatshe?"

"No, you were speaking English."

"Should I speak Japanese?"

"No, you should speak English. Just don't talk about someone in front of them as though they aren't there."

"Did I do that?"

Moru gave up and hugged her sister again.

“Shinmasa is the one,” said Moru. “He is the one of whom Mahotsukai no Ryunake spoke.”

“You are Ryuhiko,” Thabeng turned to Shinmasa and bowed again. “I am so happy Moru found you. The entire world is dependent upon you.”

“Thank you,” Shinmasa replied. “I am very pleased to meet the spirit of the mountains I love so much.”

Thabeng just grinned and did a little dance.

“Thabeng, we need a place where we can avoid Lefu Sefefo until Shinmasa has had a chance to learn how to be a dragon.”

“Oh, a dragon's lair,” said Thabeng clapping with glee. “I haven't made a dragon's lair for such a long time. I'll go and make you a place. I'll let you know where it is.”

“Thank you so much,” Moru said.

“Yes, thank you,” Shinmasa bowed.

Shinmasa and Moru threw his things in the back of the truck and headed down the mountain to find a safe place to leave his truck. The first town of any size was Salmon, Idaho. They found a U-Haul storage company and left the truck. They stopped by the local Good Will store and bought Shinmasa some extra clothes. A bathrobe and kimono on display gave Shinmasa the idea to buy the kimono and some robes which he could wear like a kimono and remove quickly when he wanted to become akai ryu. He also bought some material from which he could make fundoshi, traditional Japanese underwear that is wrapped around like a loincloth. This would give him some respectability since it can be worn in public and wouldn't shred but would fall off as Shinmasa changed, therefore it could be reused, assuming he remembered where he left it.

As they walked toward the mountains, Shinmasa called his Mother and some colleagues to tell them that he was pushing farther into the wilderness to get some new readings well away from any direct human contact.

When he spoke with his Mother he ended the conversation with “I know who I am, Mother.”

“I'm so glad,” replied his Mother. “we must sit down and talk.”

“Yes,” Shinmasa promised. “As soon as I'm done with this project. It shouldn't take long.”

Moru and Shinmasa walked silently toward the mountains. They ended up on a road called Brady Street and about a quarter of a mile outside of town they found a nice knoll a few hundred feet off the road over looking the town of Salmon. They sat down to wait for Thabeng.

As they sat looking out over the Salmon River valley Muro noticed a storm cloud. It moved erratically and was exceptionally dark and menacing.

“I'm afraid that Lefu Sefefo has found us,” Muro said softly, as though she was afraid he might hear.

“What?”

“Storms around here don't tend to come from the north and they definitely don't move back and forth as though they're looking for something . . . or more specifically someone.”

“What should we do? Should we hide?”

“Hiding isn't going to do us any good at this point.”

“But I don't know what to do,” Shinmasa was seriously frightened.



“Give me a moment,” said Moru. She stood staring at the approaching storm for what, to Shinmasa, seemed like an eternity.

“Okay. There's no way he's going to pass without spotting us, so I'm going to have you transform into Akai Ryu. If he tries to turn his storm on us, I want you to fly straight up. Don't worry about me. I'll be okay. You just go straight up until you are above his storm. Turn west and fly as fast as you can. You can move a lot faster than his storm. Go west and find a place to hide. I'll find you.” Moru paused and looked back at the storm then back at Shinmasa, “Got it?”

“Yes,” said Shinmasa, “I've got it. Go up, turn west, and run like hell.”

The storm came right to them. Shinmasa transformed into Ryuhiko and stood waiting with Moru. As the heart of the storm grew nearer he could begin to make out the distorted and grotesque features of a face. It had to be Lefu Sefefo. Ryuhiko did his best to stand tall and look confident even though inside he was terrified. He had never encountered such a violent storm in his life.

The grotesque face gave a sardonic smile. “Well, if it isn't my sister, Moru.” the voice was acrimonious. “How's Mother?” Lefu Sefefo laughed, or at least Ryuhiko figured that was what that terrifying sound was.

“And this must be the boy prince. Ryuhiko, Dragon Prince.”

Ryuhiko tried to look as strong and menacing as he could but this spirit was so terrifying, so totally evil, that it was all Ryuhiko could do to stand there without moving.

“Lefu Sefefo,” Moru shouted in a loud voice. “don't be so smug. The dragons always were the only ones who could stop you, and Ryuhiko is our means to bringing your reign of terror to an end.”

Lefu Sefefo laughed even louder. “You pompous little ass. I don't give a damn if he is the son of Morena Ryu. Look what I did to him.” The hideous face grew close to Moru. “Your days are numbered big sister.”

The Lefu Sefefo turned toward Ryuhiko. “Awe, Ryuhiko, Prince of the Dragons, or should I say, last of the dragons.”

‘What does he mean?’ Ryuhiko asked Moru.

“Oh,” said Lefu Sefefo, “Moru didn't tell you. Oh, my. It must have slipped her mind. She didn't think to tell you when she recruited you into this nasty little business.”

Lefu Sefefo paused a moment for effect - to let reality do his dirty work, “Tell him, sis. Tell him about his father, sister, brother and the rest of the dragons.”

The face of Lefu Sefefo backed away and looked down on the two. Sneering he said, “I'm not going to kill you now. I'm going to save you so you can see my awesome power and know the pain. On the right day I am going to rain down death on this continent which will be the beginning of the end for this pathetic, self-righteous little planet.”

With that the face disappeared and the storm abruptly ended.

The storm disappeared leaving Ryuhiko and Moru standing looking up into a cold rain. They stood motionless and speechless for a long time.

Finally, Ryuhiko transformed into his human form, walked slowly to the bag of clothes, still lying under a nearby tree, took out a piece of material and wrapped a fundoshi around his waist. The cold rain felt like needles

hitting his bare skin. He pulled out one of the robes and was putting it on when he turned to Moru, who had yet to move.

“What did he mean about my father, brother and sister?” Shinmasa's voice was soft and low. It was the voice of a man who had just gone to hell and back and wasn't sure if he had survived.

“What?” said Moru shaking her head as though she was just becoming conscious. “What did you say?”

“What did he mean about my father, brother and sister and the other dragons?” Shinmasa repeated a little bit stronger. He walked to where Moru was still standing staring after the disappeared Lefu. He took her by the shoulders and turn her to face him. “What did he mean? What haven't you told me?”

“Lefu Sefefo is my brother,” Moru turned her head away. Almost as though talking to herself, “he is so different. He is so full of pain and anger and hatred.”

“What did you fail to tell me? Why is he so intent upon making me suffer?”

“You are the dragon prince. That's why you are called Ryuhiko, . . .”

“I know what my dragon name means, but why?” Shinmasa interrupted. He squeezed Moru's shoulders and again turned her face toward him. “What haven't you told me?” His voice was now strong and insistent.

“Your father was the Dragon King,” Moru's head dropped as though the weight of the memory was too great to hold it up. “His name was Ryutada. He was our champion along with two of his children, your sister, Haruko, and brother, Ryutake. Any time that Lefu would try to hurt people or destroy something, your Father would stop him.” Moru raised her head and looked into Shimasa's eyes. “When he would rise up to face Lefu he was a blinding brilliance.”

The two sat down under a tree as Moru continued her story.

“Lefu created a horrible, malevolent creature he called Babe Kgwebo. It was like a cross between a plague and the anthropomorphism of pure terror, but Lefu loved Babe Kgwebo. I wasn't there, but my sister, Phoofo, the animal spirit, saw your Father destroy Babe Kgwebo. She said that Babe Kgwebo got too near to your Father. Your Father put his paw on Babe Kgwebo's chest and sent a beam of light straight through him. Lefu was so incensed that he went on a rampage starting wars, feeding hatred and prejudice, and violent storms wherever he went. It was all that your Father, brother and sister could do to contain him.”

“One day shortly after you were born Lefu caused a great storm at sea around an oil platform that had been poorly capped. He liked to use that type of situation. Greed was the reason for the well being poorly capped, and when people found out they would be angry and want revenge. It always played into Lefu's hands that way. Your Father, Haruko and Ryutake went to protect the platform. But the greed, selfishness and lack of caring that surrounded the platform made Lefu stronger and stronger. The oil gushed to the surface like the welling up of centuries of oppression and anger. The derrick caught on fire and began to buckle. Men were trying to escape the flames by jumping to their death in the oily sea. The three dragons were trying to save the men but there was no trust or faith. The doomed men died believing in the very ones who caused their death. Little by little Ryutada, Haruko and Ryutake were pushed under the oil by the weight of the oil rig and all the evil that went with it. They drowned trying to save the humans. The human news media reported that a bad storm had damaged an oil platform. It never mentioned the death and the millions of gallons of oil that poured into the sea.” Moru dropped her head and cried. It seemed to Shinmasa that the branches of all the trees around them sagged as though burdened with a great, unseen weight.

Shinmasa put his arm around the sobbing woman. She might have been a powerful spirit, but right then she was as vulnerable and fragile as a small child. The forest around her was sharing her grief. It took some time before Shinmasa could bring himself to ask her the next question. He just sat and held Moru as she cried.

“What did he mean about the others?”

“They're all gone. All the dragons are dead except maybe three or four others whom Mahotsukai Ryunake hid.”

“All gone?!”

“Your Mother's name is Ryu 'Me,” Moru looked up at Shinmasa. “She was the last of the Dragon Mothers - women who could give birth to kawizate dragons. Lefu found and destroyed all of the other Dragon Mothers. Mahotsukai Ryunake gathered the other surviving babies and hid them around the world and then took away your Mother's memory of who she was so she could not be discovered by Lefu or his henchmen. He did not, however, take away her belief in dragons. That is what helps make you powerful. Mahotsukai Ryunake is out right now trying to find the others without Lefu knowing.”

“Are my other brothers and sisters dragons?”

“No. Just you.” Moru smiled. “Your Mother is a great woman. For many ages she carried and gave birth to kawizate dragons. A few years before the birth of your oldest sister, your Mother fell in love with a mortal - your earthly Father. He was a good man and cared deeply for your Mother. Your Mother gave up being a Dragon Mother and immortality for him. He never knew. It was a decision I don't think she'll ever regret. But my Mother, Me Tlhaho, was worried about Lefu and asked your Mother to carry one last kawizate dragon. You.”

**S**hinmasa sat trying to digest everything he had just heard. It was hard enough to learn that you're a dragon, but even harder to learn that you're a dragon prince who is the target of a spirit who possesses all the hatred and evil in the world. Then, if you get past that, you find that you might be the last dragon and it is going to be up to you to stop this super-powered evil spirit to save the world. No pressure.

Moru had stopped crying and was pressed tightly against his chest. They just sat.

Thabeng arrived a few hours later. She made another rather unorthodox entrance. Shinmasa really liked Moru's younger sister. He had assumed, since mountains are so majestic and at times stern looking, that Thabeng would be big, powerful, stately and a bit on the serious side. To the contrary Thabeng was more of a female version of Peter Pan, or perhaps even better, the typical comedy movie stereotype of the blonde female cheerleader. Shinmasa knew that there was no way she was as scatter-brained as she presented. This had to be her 'I'm off the clock' behavior.

“Oh, I have the greatest place for you, Ryuhiko. It is near the peak of a mountain that rises about 9,000 feet. It is right at the top of a cirque that was created by a glacier and there's even a lovely lake in the middle of the cirque. It is so remote that even I haven't been there before, but it is gorgeous. You'll love it.” Thabeng paused a moment and did a little dance, then picked right back up as though she'd never stopped. “And I made a large area for when . . .”

Moru interrupted. “Why don't you show us instead of tell us?”

“That's a great idea,” Thabeng giggled. “That's why she's my big sister,” she said to Shinmasa. Then turning back to Moru, “It should be exactly 47.29 miles northwest of this spot.”

“Could it be 47.3?” teased Moru.

“Nope,” Thabeng evidently didn't joke about that sort of thing. “47.3 would put you on the western side of the ridge and you'd miss it completely.”

“In that case, lead the way sister,” Moru laughed.

Shinmasa took off the robe he was wearing and was standing there in his fundoshi. He transformed into Ryuhiko leaving only the cloth of the fundoshi lying on the ground. Moru picked up the cloth and robe, stuffed them into a bag, and climbed onto Ryuhiko's back.

Thabeng led them exactly 47.29 miles northwest. As they approached Ryuhiko noticed a dark spot high on the cliff above the cirque lake. Thabeng led them straight to it.

Landing in a cavernous area in the side of the mountain, Thabeng took on her human form and danced around the entrance to the lair. She was so excited about her creation that it was all that Shinmasa and Moru could do to keep up with her chatter. The entrance to the lair could not be seen from the lake below, which made it virtually invisible. Just inside the lair was a large room. To one side was an area filled with human amenities, but most of the room was created for a dragon.

As Thabeng danced around the lair chattering happily, Moru took hold of Shinmasa's hand. With a gentle squeeze she said “This is where it begins. This is where you will learn to be a dragon.”

“I know,” Shinmasa replied looking back toward the east where they had encountered Lefu. It was late afternoon and the setting sun reflected like a red glow off the mountain tops. He thought of the old sailors' saying 'red sails at night, sailor's delight'. The view was breathtaking and he hoped the red sky was a good omen. “I know,” he said squeezing Moru's hand tightly.

The lair which Thabeng had created for Ryuhiko was big enough for two or three dragons Ryuhiko's size. Ryuhiko was only about eight feet tall from the tip of his tail to his nose. The main chamber of the lair was at least twenty feet high and went a good thirty to forty feet back into the mountain. The floor was the natural stone of the mountain. At the far end was a bed of straw covered with beautiful Persian rugs.

The human area of the lair had much lower ceilings but was still quite spacious. It reminded Shinmasa of pictures he had seen of a desert sheikh's pavilion. The floor was covered with beautiful Persian carpets. There was a large oval area that was ringed with over-stuffed sofas that were very low to the floor. A number of low wooded tables were scatter within the oval and there was an abundance of pillows. The walls were covered with Persian rugs. An enormous fireplace with thick wooden mantel dominated one wall, and cooking utensils were hanging near the stone hearth. There was a middle aged woman bent over the fire cooking. She stood up and bowed deeply toward Shinmasa and Moru as the two approached. They returned her greeting.

"This is Catherine," Thabeng said as she continued to dance around the lair.

"Very nice to meet you," said Shinmasa.

"It is an honor to serve the dragon prince," replied Catherine, again bowing very low.

"How did you . . . ."

"Oh," Thabeng interrupted. "Catherine's brother was Ryuyasu. Lefu killed him several years ago. I asked her if she'd like to be your housekeeper while you're here."



"I gladly accepted," added Catherine. "Anything I can do to help bring Lefu's reign of terror to an end."

"Thank you so much." Shinmasa smiled. "The food smells delicious."

"Thank you," Catherine turned toward the fireplace where a black Dutch oven hung above the fire. "My brother had a lair like this and I learned to cook over an open fire. I actually like it. I became Ryuyasu's housekeeper after Lefu killed my husband and child."

"I am so sorry," both Shinmasa and Moru said simultaneously.

"I try to let it go as much as possible. I know that anger and hatred only hurt me, and that Lefu gains power from our anger and rage. It isn't easy." Catherine focused her attention on the Dutch oven.

Moru and Shinmasa looked into the two rooms that opened off the human area. One was Catherine's room and the other Shinmasa's. The were both dominated by a large pile of straw covered with beautiful rugs, blankets and pillows.

Catherine made a delicious vegetable soup for dinner with homemade bread. Thabeng left after dinner and Catherine excused herself and went to her room after she had cleaned up her kitchen. Moru and Shinmasa sat in the comfortable living area sipping on still steaming cups of Aborvitae tea as they watched the fire. They sat quietly for a long time, each lost in their own thoughts.

It was Shinmasa who finally broke the silence. "Why am I the last of the dragons? Did Lefu kill them all?"

"No," Moru didn't move. She just stared at the fire as she spoke. "Lefu killed several but most just disappeared over time."

"Why was that?"

"The life of a magical creature is dependent upon people either believing in their existence or accepting the possibility of their existence. The Kawizate Dragon is the exception but there were always very few Kawizate. For a long time before human written history dragons were an integral part of human life and interacted with humans frequently. They were protectors and the humans often looked to dragons for help."

"About 5,000 years ago an evil king named Zli ruled a war-like tribe from a mountain, Grintovec, in what is today Slovenia. From his mountain perch he could swoop down on villages in what is today Italy, Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Hungary. He raped, murdered, plundered and enslaved the people. There seemed to be no stopping him. These were the people of the Urnfield culture and were mostly early Celts. Zli was so evil that the High King of Dragons, Leholo, decided that the dragons must help the humans."

"But if the dragons were helping the people in Europe," asked Shinmasa, "how did they get the reputation of being evil creatures?"

"Like humans, not all dragons are good, nor are all dragons evil," replied Moru rolling onto her side and looking at Shinmasa. "Zli knew that he couldn't defeat the dragons so he bribed some greedy dragons with treasure to join him."

"So that's how the European dragon got the reputation of liking treasure," exclaimed Shinmasa. It was beginning to make sense.

"Yes. After many years of fierce struggle Zli was killed in battle and the mercenary dragons fled. There was no reason to stick around when the source of their wealth was dead."

"Why were they the ones everyone remembered? Why aren't there stories about Leholo and the good dragons?"

"Homo sapiens have always been story tellers, and they unfortunately will save and repeat the stories that get the best reaction from the crowd. Your modern news media has proven that it's bad news and violence that sells. The story tellers knew that before recorded time. So over time people forgot about how most of the dragons helped."

Shinmasa shook his head sadly.

"After all," Moru explained, "the people of 1930s and 1940s Germany were called Nazis, right?"

"Yes," Shinmasa gave Moru a curious look.

"Did you know that only seven percent of the German people during World War II were actually members of the Nazi Party?"

"No, I didn't." Shinmasa gave that some thought.

"So, because of the story-tellers, European people started thinking of all dragons as evil treasure hoarders."

"That doesn't explain why people can't see dragons anymore."

"Humans were gatherers, then hunters, then farmers. They were always close to their nature. They could see the dragons because they were close to nature and could believe that the dragon existed. Modern humans say that ancient people believing in dragons was superstition and mythology. As technology grew the human's ability to see all that is around them diminished. They could not see the dragons any more because they were sure they didn't exist."

"Another example of that mind filtration we've talked about," said Shinmasa.

"Partially," replied Moru. "But a lot of it is because humans don't believe that anything can be true or exist unless they have 'discovered' it themselves. They do that to one another. I bet you didn't know that

tuberculosis could have been contained decades earlier if the medical community had not ignored the discoveries of Robert Koch and the work of Edward Trudeau. They were certain that there was no way consumption could be caused by a bacteria so they ignored the evidence for a quarter of a century."

"We are indeed an arrogant breed."

"There is also the problem that as humans have evolved they no longer see themselves as a part of nature. From there it was an easy step to 'I don't like nature' and 'I don't need nature.' As they mindlessly destroy the nature around themselves in the name of progress they are, in fact, destroying their very being."

"You're preaching to the choir," said Shinmasa.

"Doing what to what?"

"I already agree with that," Shinmasa smiled. "You don't need to sell me."

"I get so upset," Moru turned back toward the fireplace. "Lefu is using them and they are going to help him destroy the world."

"Guess that's where I come in," also turning his attention back to the dying fire.

"Yes," Moru said softly.

They fell into silence watching the glowing embers. Each pondering what the morrow would bring. Moru struggled with the knowledge that the young Ryuhiko did not have the magic experience to battle Lefu. She wondered if she was just uselessly sending the young dragon prince to his death. There didn't seem to be any options and Lefu definitely wanted to hurt the two of them emotionally as well as physically. Shinmasa also worried about learning enough magic before he had to confront Lefu. He had met Lefu and stood his ground when he really wanted so much to run

and hide. He knew that he was no match for the mighty spirit, but he had to try. For the sake of the world and all he loved, he had to try even though he knew, down deep inside, that he was going to die trying.

Finally Moru excused herself. She was not going to stay with Shinmasa that night. He would be safe. She had to go and prepare for his training. Strangely Shinmasa was neither upset nor worried that Moru was leaving him alone. He knew that Lefu wasn't going to kill him in his sleep. Lefu was going to make his death a spectacle.

He walked with Moru to the mouth of the lair. After she had left, he stood looking out over the mountain. They were dark and cold, but he felt their strength. As he stood staring at nothing at all, he thought about his parents and his ancestry. His parents were predominantly Buddhist but had retained a lot of Shinto out of respect for their native land. In the 18th century it was called Shinbutsu.

Shinmasa always considered himself more of a Buddhist. Buddhism is 99% philosophy of life and 1% religion. Shinmasa considered himself 99% Buddhist. He had noticed the difference between his parent's approach. His Mother practiced walking meditation at least twice a day, moving slowing around her garden. His Father had practiced the tradition sitting meditation. Shinmasa had been taught about meditation but he had always 'thought on his feet'. Driven by an unseen force Shinmasa sat down on the stone ledge, crossed his legs in the traditional lotus position, and meditated.

"Breathing in. I know that I am breathing in. Breathing out. I know that I am breathing out." Whenever he caught his thoughts drifting away from his breath he would gently remind himself and return to focusing on his breath. He would see snippets of experiences and events. Looking and letting them go, he would return to his breath. The memory of Lefu looming over him and threatening him returned time and time again.

Shinmasa remembered being taught about making friends with your pain, but the best he could do was to let the image go and return to his breathing.

In Buddhism we are a part of a oneness. Nichiren, born in 1222, wrote "Life at each moment encompasses ... both self and environment of all sentient beings in every condition of life as well as insentient beings -- plants, sky and earth, on down to the most minute particles of dust." In Buddhism life is a unity of the physical and the spiritual, with the two aspects of our lives being the manifestation of the same universal law, totally inseparable and of equal importance. This means that the duality we perceive; i.e. things around us as being separate from us; is an illusion. We are one with the universe. At the most fundamental level of life there is no separation between what we perceive as "me" and the environment.

The same is true in quantum physics. In quantum physics there is no real physical barrier between the atoms which are a part of what we call "us" and the atoms which are a part of another object. This means that, in essence, the entire universe is an enormous connected oneness.

Shinmasa found that he didn't really want to get up. He sat allowing thoughts to pass by him like a river. Looking and considering each thought, each snippet of memory he sometimes had a difficult time letting go, but he did and they passed along. As the sky went from the blue-grey of pre-dawn to the first rays of the sun, Shinmasa still sat. He was at peace.



Life in the lair soon evolved into a routine. Moru would arrive shortly after sunrise with two old fashioned quart bottles of milk. Catherine, who was always up before the sun, would have steel cut oatmeal with top milk and fresh bread ready for Moru and him. The whole raw milk was a treat. When a bottle of unpasteurized whole milk is allowed to sit, the cream floats to the top. That's how it gets its name 'top milk'. As a child, Shinmasa's parents always bought their milk straight from a dairy farmer. It definitely got the kids to the breakfast table. The first ones there got the top milk for their cereal.

Catherine was a whiz with a cast iron dutch oven. She would do porridge, stews, a vegetarian version of shepherd's pie, a Greek style vegetable casserole and Italian orzo spinach soup, just to name a few, as well as cobblers and deserts. She would definitely make Alton Brown proud. Shinmasa always wondered where she came up with all of her supplies. He never saw her leave. There wasn't a road for 30 miles nevertheless a grocery store. He figured that Moru was providing for her needs somehow.

After a hearty breakfast Shinmasa would transform to Ryuhiko and training would start. He didn't return to his human form until they had high tea about four o'clock in the afternoon. Then he would rest while Moru and he would critique their day. They would eat another substantial meal - usually from Catherine's seemingly magical dutch oven - in the late evening and Moru would leave. Catherine would finish her chores and retire to her room. Shinmasa would go out on the ledge above the glacier cirque and meditate.

Shinmasa didn't think in terms of progress related to his meditation. It served a purpose. It was a process and an integral part of life. Meditation kept him focused, helped him be more mindful and aware. Through

meditation he was learning how to manage his emotions. Perhaps it was a matter of understanding and accepting his emotions. He 'technically' knew all about meditation.

He rapidly moved beyond following his breath, although he always started there. He knew that as he saw past experiences go by like video clips he should acknowledge them along with any emotion and then permit them to move off. Most people think that our life history flows like an unbroken ribbon when, according to Buddhism, it is a string of these clips. They can be looked at as an event or as minutely as a single breath.

It was during one such meditation session that Shinmasa began to study an experience closely. In the clip he was a small boy with Mahotsukai Ryunake, when he was the family gardener, and another man. In his mind Shinmasa was leaning closer and closer to see and wishing that he could hear. At that moment he found himself standing in the garden near the two men. Shinmasa was shocked. He looked around. The others did not appear to be aware of his presence. He spoke but no one appeared to hear. He was still the observer, but somehow he had actually entered the historic event, the time clip from his past. He watched and listened.

The man to whom Mahotsukai Ryunake was speaking was Japanese. He was tall, well-built and dignified. His skin was the color of oak and, close up, showed the affects of time and conflict. His hair was jet black and pulled back into a traditional hair knot. He was wearing a black kimono with gold and silver hamaka and a red montsuki haori jacket. Shinmasa had not seen such beautiful formal wear since his sister's wedding.

"The boy is strong and clever," Mahotsukai Ryunake was saying. They were both looking down at the child, Shinmasa. "He will take after his father."



The man smiled. "I just wish that he did not have to meet our mutual adversary."

"He will be ready," said Mahotsukai Ryunake. "He is already very skilled in the martial arts."

Shinmasa's Mother approached. She bowed low. "Takai o Ryutada"

"Barako," said Ryutada bowing. "You look good. You have done a wonderful job raising young Ryuhiko."

"Thank you, my Lord," Shinmasa's mother smiled broadly.

Shinmasa didn't really pay any attention to the rest of the conversation. This was his biological father. She had called him Takai o, or high king. He wanted so much to talk to him but he could only watch. He wanted to see him as a dragon. He wanted to ask him about the light of which he had heard in more than one story. Listening carefully to the accounts of Ryutada destroying Babe Kgwebo every storyteller mentioned Ryutada putting his hand on Babe's chest and light passing through Babe.

To Shinmasa returning to his meditation felt like pulling his head through the neck of a tight sweater. He sat looking out into the darkness. He had just seen his biological father, the famous and revered Takai o Ryutada. It made Shinmasa feel so much better to know that the famous dragon king actually came to visit his son even if he couldn't tell him who he was.

Night after night Shinmasa entered life events where he might be able to catch sight of his father and observe him use the light, but it never happened. He was watching the clips of his life go by when he noticed the space between the clips. "Of course," he thought to himself, "sunyata."

Many Buddhist teachers and meditation masters tell how one can get a glimpse of sunyata by getting in that space between the clips. Sunyata is

usually translated "emptiness" but it can also be translated "spaciousness" and "openness". It is actually of great positive significance in Buddhism.

Shinmasa thought of the Heart Sutra which contained the famous saying with which every Buddhist student struggled. "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form. Emptiness is not separate from form, form is not separate from emptiness. Whatever is form is emptiness, whatever is emptiness is form." He smiled to himself. Sunyata is not a void. It is the foundation and true nature of all phenomena. It is the basic principle of all existence.

For several more days Ryuhiko practiced the arts and skills of being a dragon and understanding his adversary, Lefu Sefefo, by day and Shinmasa meditated and reached out to the space between the clips where he might get a glimpse of sunyata by night.

His chance finally came. It had been a good day and Shinmasa was focused and comfortable in his meditation. He was calmly watching life clips flowing by and observing the space between. In his mind he moved closer and closer as he had done so many times before. But this time the movement of the clips seem to get slower and Shinmasa was able to look beyond.

Shinmasa was standing, or at least he felt he was standing, in a vast void. He was trying to take it all in and make sense of what he was experiencing when there was a voice behind him.

"I didn't expect to find anyone here nevertheless you, my son."

Shinmasa turned. It was his father, Ryutada. "How is this possible?" He asked.

"We are both seeking a glimpse of sunyata," said Ryutada with a smile and turning to look out into the void.

"Is this sunyata?"

"No," said Ryutada, still looking intensely into the void. "but we should be close. We have broken out of our duality."

"But we're here together," insisted Shinmasa. "That can't be. You are dead so you must be from the past and I'm here from the present."

"That may be true," Ryutada laughed, "but last time I knew I am quite alive. The teachers tell us that time is an illusion. Guess this is the proof. Of course I'm here in my now and you're here in your now. I'm evidently dead in your now. Please don't tell me when that is."

"Would that cause some sort of time paradox?"

"I don't think so. But it would weaken me because I would always be aware of my own impending doom and therefore would not be as bold as I should."

"Takai o, I have actually been searching for you."

"How? Why?"

"Never mind the 'how', it didn't work. But everyone who tells how you destroyed Babe Kgwebo tells of the light that came from your hand when you touched his chest. No one knows what it was."

"The light is the power of all goodness, compassion, peace and joy."

"Goodness, compassion, peace and joy have a power?"

"That's the best way to describe it," said Ryutada. "Have you ever noticed what happens when a group of people are joined together in peace and joy for a good purpose and show compassion? Nothing can stop them. There is a power. They are stronger than evil and hatred."

"And you found a way to harness that power?"

"No. I don't think so." Takai Ryutada stood and puzzled that for a few moments. "I didn't 'harness' anything. I realized the power and I realized

that Buddha was right when he taught that all humans are, by nature, good and compassionate. I learned to focus the energy. If I were to have focused the power of goodness, compassion peace and joy on an evil human, the goodness and compassion would have overcome their evil and enable them to return to their natural goodness and compassion. Since Babe Kgwebo was made of evil and hatred there was no natural goodness to which to return. He just ceased to be. That's why Lefu keeps his distance from me."

Shinmasa thought about what he had just heard. Could it be so simple as goodness and compassion? Obviously it had been. "How do I learn to do that?" he asked.

"You can't learn," Ryutada put his hand on the Shinmasa's shoulder. "You can't learn it like ashi guruma or Hikikomi gaeshi. If you are pure and true to your calling as a protector, it is inside you right now. It will be there when you need and you will know what to do."

"But Masuta . . . ."

"Trust me," said Ryutada patting Shinmasa on the chest, "it is in there. You will learn how to focus it through . . . ." Ryutada suddenly paused as though listening then said anxiously, "I must go." With that he vanished and Shinmasa was sitting alone on the mountain ledge.



In a dingy office on the edge of Boulder, Colorado a short, overweight man sat behind a cluttered desk. He was perspiring profusely and his face belied the excruciating internal conflict he was experiencing. He was looking at a tall, slender man who stood calmly looking out of the window at the dirty clutter of storage tanks and tanker trucks.

"Look, Mr. Nieman," the tall man said without turning away from the window. "you have hundreds of gallons of sludge out there. You can't afford to pay for disposal. You have no more storage. You're about to go under ... you're going to drown in your own waste."

"I know. I know!" whimpered Thomas Nieman, the man at the desk. "I've just never done anything like this before, and it seems so . . . . so . . . ." He struggled for the words to describe the disgusting deed that he knew he was going to do.

"You're not going to hurt anyone." The tall man, who had introduced himself as Larry Stephano, turned and faced Nieman. "Besides they're just a bunch of Indians in the middle of no-where."

"I know. I just . . . ."

"Just what!?" Stephano was getting annoyed. "Just going to lose your business. Just going to lose your big house, mountain lodge, fine cars, reputation . . . .?"

"Okay." Nieman looked down at the checkbook lying on the desk in front of him. He picked up the pen and wrote Larry Stephano a check for fifty thousand dollars.

"Good," Stephano was now all smiles. In fact, his grin could have been called scary. "Two tankers. Have them meet my man in Kinnear. He'll lead them to the dump site."

<#SectionBreak>

Several days later an off-duty Shoshone deputy sheriff named Eddie Proudeagle was trekking along a ledge above the Ethete Cutoff southwest of Kinnear, Wyoming. Looking down on the road he noticed a curious site. There were two tanker trucks following a pickup up the road past Mule Butte. One didn't usually see trucks on the cutoff, nevertheless two tankers. He watched. When they stopped near a small dirty road that lead up to the foot of Mule Butte, the deputy became concerned. He got his radio out of his pack and called dispatch.

Slowly the trucks started up the dirt road. It was difficult. Lefu watched from the edge of Mule Butte. It had been so easy to get Thomas Nieman to pay him to dump toxic waste into Johnstown Valley from the side of Mule Butte. Nieman would have dumped his waste right into the Wind River if Lefu told him. He would have done anything to save his wealth and avoid the embarrassment of bankruptcy. This was a start. Nieman would get caught soon but there were plenty more like him.

The trucks were getting near the turn that would take them to the end of the road and their dump site right up against Mule Butte. There was a three-hundred-foot drop into the valley.

While the trucks were moving into place to dump their loads the Sheriff and two deputies were turning south onto Ethete Cutoff and moving fast. Dispatch had told the Sheriff about Eddie Proudeagle's report. There was no reason for two tank trucks to be on the cutoff road, nevertheless pulling off on one of the side roads, unless they were up to no good.

As the sheriff sped down Ethete Cutoff the dispatcher had been talking to Eddie Proudeagle and Eddie was walking casually toward the old blue Ford F-150 that was still sitting where the tankers had turned off. The man in the driver's seat watched Eddie in his mirror. He watched more out of curiosity than concern. To him it was just a hiker.

Eddie stepped to the passenger's side when he got close to the vehicle. Eddie noted that the driver was alone. He carefully drew his service revolver that was on his right hip. He kept it out of the driver's view until he pulled open the passenger door and aimed it at the driver.

"Deputy Sheriff. Keep your hands on the wheel where I can see them."

The driver glanced down at a two-way radio lying on the seat.

"No," said the Deputy smiling. "You don't get to warn your buddies that we're coming. I can pull this trigger a lot faster than you can get to that radio. Just sit still and relax."

The Sheriff and three others arrived a few minutes later. The driver was removed from the truck, handcuffed and put in the back of one of the squad cars. Eddie climbed into the backseat of the Sheriff's car and they started up the rough dirt road.

"I'm sure glad you were out here," the Sheriff said smiling at Eddie in his mirror. "Did they have any markings?"

"None that I could see from the ridge."

"Doesn't matter. The only thing up this road is the old abandoned sheep ranch."

The men dumping the tankers couldn't hear the Sheriff's approach with the engines and pumps running. One of the men happened to look up and saw the cars approaching when they were not quite 100 yards away. He

picked up a rifle and shot at the approaching cars. The bullet shattered the Sheriff's window.

"Guess that confirms our assumption they're up to no good," said the Sheriff cutting the steering wheel hard to the left and sliding to a stop. The second squad car followed suit. Another bullet smashed the Sheriff's light bar.

The Sheriff reached into the back seat of his car and got his bullhorn.

"This is Sheriff Weda. There is no way out of here. Throw down your guns and step out with you hands up."

There was a long pause. Suddenly a man stepped out from behind one of the tankers and opened fire with an automatic weapon. That's all it took. It was over in an instant. One of the deputies returned fire and hit the gunman. The gunman held his finger on the the trigger of his automatic weapon as he fell and sent a hail of high calibre ordinance into the side of the tanker, the control panel and the pipe which was still spewing toxic waste.

In a flash, literally, there was an explosion with flames and black smoke rising high into the sky. Within seconds the entire ravine was an inferno and soon the fire had followed back up the dump hose of the second tanker and it exploded.

The heat was so intense that the Sheriff's men climbed into their cars and backed away as quickly as they could. Hours later the area was still burning. A group of volunteer firemen and a brush truck had come to make sure that the fire didn't turn into a raging wildfire. One of the Sheriff's deputies sat with them drinking coffee. At the top of the butte above them Lefu also stood watching. He was disappointed. He had really wanted Nieman to make a couple of dumps before something like this happened, and he really wanted at least one load of waste to make it



to the Wind River, but he did enjoy the show nevertheless. He so enjoyed it when he caused chaos, death and destruction. Anyway, Nieman wasn't the only pawn in the game.



**S**hinmasa's training was going quite well. He especially like breathing fire and was getting quite accurate. This, he had thought, would have been great fun if he weren't constantly reminded of the reason for the training.

Lefu and his stinky servant, Bafu Nama, were noticeably keeping their distance. Shinmasa knew that it wasn't because of Ryuhiko's great power. So what was up?

While Shinmasa really enjoyed life in the lair - no electricity, no phones, no computers - he had realized his need for a computer and insisted that Moru allow him to bring a generator, computer and satellite dish to the lair. Since his encounter with Lefu, Shinmasa had been mulling over Lefu's threat. Lefu had said that he wasn't going to kill Ryuhiko because he wanted Ryuhiko to witness the destruction of North America.

Even if Lefu was a spirit gone bad, anything he did to destroy the mundane physical world would have to be a physical act. Faced with that scenario, Shinmasa knew that his computer would be the weapon of choice. Lefu had been brazen enough to announce that he wanted an audience for his deadly act, but he demonstrated self-controlled. He knew that he dare not tell anyone what he was going to do.

When he wasn't Ryuhiko training to be the dragon king, Shinmasa was either meditating or on his computer. He enjoyed spending time with Moru. The two of them would go out on the ledge above the cirque after dinner and talk. Even though she was a spirit, Shinmasa knew that he was still in love with Mary, Moru's physical manifestation. He loved how she would sit near him, looking up at the sky. They would try to talk about pleasant, mundane things - trees, mountains, rivers, stars - but the conversation always ended up being about Lefu.

After his meditation, Shinmasa would spend hours on the internet. If the clue to Lefu's plan was anywhere to be found, it had to show up on his computer. With his computer Shinmasa could take the pulse of the world and find anomalies in the normal series of events. He knew that whatever Lefu was up to would make anything from a giant splash to a ripple on the internet surface, and he would see it. He had to see it. If he was to defeat Lefu, it had to be because he used his brain and was one step ahead. If all he had was brute strength, he knew that he was dead, and so was the world.

Shinmasa had seen the report of the incident at Mule Butte on the internet. It hadn't particular stood out because that type of activity wasn't all that uncommon, but Shinmasa had made a mental note nevertheless. A few weeks later Shinmasa was on his computer in the early morning hours. He sat looking intently at his computer screen.

"That's it," he said aloud to himself. "That's it!" He flipped thorough several screens. Sitting back in his chair he proclaimed "Lefu, you son-of-a-bitch, I've got you. I know what you're up to and it isn't going to happen on my watch!"

Shinmasa had figured out Lefu Sefefo's plan and the discovery made Shinmasa work all the harder to learn and prepare. By day he practiced his dragon skills and talked to Moru about dragons and life. Night after

night he would return to the emptiness that is not empty hoping to meet his father. He grew stronger day by day, but more importantly he grew wiser.

He and Moru spent hours discussing nature and what was at stake in their battle with Lefu Sefefo. The reality of Lefu's use of negative human emotions naturally and quickly led to quantum physics and how that relates to the conservation of energy. In quantum physics we learn that everything in the universe is interconnected or, perhaps better expressed, one. The individual person or item being distinguished as individual is only seen as an item or individual by an observer through the illusion of macro-physics. If this is true then we must accept that what happens to one part of the universe will necessarily effect all other parts of the universe.

The famous psychologist, Carl Jung, believed in interconnectedness and studied quantum physics and eastern mysticism along with his psychological research to confirm his concept of synchronicity in which the belief in ultimate oneness of the universe is not only implicit but fundamental.

The reason that the western mind has so much trouble with this concept is, according to Jung, the westerner carefully sifts, weighs, selects, classifies and isolates while the Asian “picture of the moment encompasses everything down to the minutest nonsensical detail, because all of the ingredients make up the observed moment.”

What troubled Shimasa was how one could reconcile the oneness of two such extreme opposites. How could he, or anyone, accept that he was one with this spirit who is full of such hatred and animosity that he is not only willing but desirous to destroy all life on planet earth. The only possible explanation came in the form of yin and yang. Yin and yang would explain the polar opposites of Lefu and Ryuhiko, but there was something

missing. It just didn't fit. Yin and yang do adequately, if not superbly, explain a perceived balance in the universe, but Shinmasa could not accept that yin and yang were absolutes; that is, that there was no other option or reality.

Shinmasa thought back to his college days when he took a philosophy course. The professor promised an 'A' to any student who could show an opposite to love.

In the end result, when the smoke had cleared, none of the students could show an opposite to love. It sounds ridiculous but true. English has one word 'love' which it uses to label all forms of love. To 'love' a mate is, in fact, very different than, say, to 'love' ice cream. To the latter one can define an opposite which, in English, would be 'hate'. But there is no opposite to 'love' between two people. Long story short, it doesn't exist.

The Greeks have four words for love – Eros (ἔρως) - love, mostly of the sexual passion; Philia (φιλία) - affectionate regard, friendship, love for family member; Storge (στοργή) - love, affection as with a parent for a child (rare in ancient Greek); and Agape (ἀγάπη) - love, especially brotherly love, charity. One can not identify an opposite for any of these.

While Ryuhiko may be the yang to Lefu's yin, it does not define a relationship that must be. For there to be a day, must there always be a night? Does not the world's moon always have the same face to the sun. Yes, but that means that the dark side is the yin to the bright side's yang. The mental argument went on and on and on. The only hope was that there is no real and true opposite to love. That alone is the foundation on which one can say yin and yang are not absolute.

Lefu Sefefo knew that Shinmasa would eventually figure out his plan. Actually Lefu wanted him to figure it out and be there to see the beginning of the end of North America but he didn't want him to figure it out in time to do anything to foil his plan. To keep him busy Lefu

decided that he needed to create some chaos to attract Ryuhiko's attention and keep him occupied.



Unfortunately the basic personality of the homo sapiens gave Lefu Sefefo plenty of opportunity to cause trouble.

The small island of Pulau Sulu was just what Lefu needed. It was actually a part of the Phillipines but it was only 53 miles from Malaysia while it was 135 miles from the nearest other island in the Phillipines. With the average elevation being like that of so many of these small islands, only about three meters, the people were understandably worried when the sea started to rise. Malaysia and Phillipines have a cordial relationship but there's no love lost between them. Politically they are fighting over several islands and Malaysia is a Moslem nations while the Phillipines is predominantly Roman Catholic. It didn't take much for Lefu to do his dirty work.

He sent a rather skilled trouble-maker by the name of Mmolai Botle. The plan was to keep hitting Pulau Sulu with unusual and severe storms. This would not only do serious damage but cause the surrounding seas to rise which would daily increase the risk of the island finding itself under water. The people would begin to flee and they would naturally flee to the closest place; viz. Malaysia. It was then Mmolai's job to get the people in Malaysia angry at the refugees to the point that they turn violent.

Shinmasa first became aware of the situation from watching the news on his laptop. Lefu was right. It did attract Ryuhiko's attention.

“You know that's Lefu's handiwork,” warned Moru. “He's baiting you. He wants to get you out before you're ready.”

“Oh, I have no doubt that it's Lefu,” agreed Shinmasa, “but I'm not so sure he's looking for a fight.”

“And why would you say that?”

“Because when he confronted us in the storm he told me that he wasn't going to kill me because he wants me to see North America die,” said Shinmasa while studying maps of Pulau Sulu. Moru could tell that he wasn't paying a bit of attention to her warning. “How long do you think it would take me to fly there?”

“A very long time,” Moru snapped. She was a tad annoyed about being ignored. She'd known Lefu her entire life. But there was no argument and Moru very quickly concluded that, if she wasn't going to stop Shinmasa, she'd better do her best to protect him.

Ryuhiko planned his flight so that he would arrive in Pulau Sulu after dark. Even in the darkness he could see that all of the stilt houses along the coast were under water and what passed for the high spot of the island was just barely above sea. Most of the huts that were not under water were on their sides, broken and crumpled. They looked like grotesque silhouettes in the dark with light from the fires adding to the unnatural appearance. He could make out groups of people lying on the ground near small fires huddled together against the evening chill that was present even in the tropics. Most of the people had no clothes. Naked children lay snuggled as close as they could get to an adult while many adults were using themselves as human shelter for others. Trash and debris was scatter all around.

As Ryuhiko looked down on the devastation and human suffering he filled with emotion. He couldn't tell which was stronger, the urge to cry

or scream out in rage. He struggled with the drive to do something to help. The frustration was almost more than he could bear. There was no reason to even stop here. He could do nothing about this misery. The only way he could help these people was by stopping Lefu Sefefo. Sadly, he lifted high into the air and headed south toward Malaysia.

He barely made it to landfall before light. He found that the Pulau Suluians had first fled to a small fishing village on the north end of Jambongan Island. At first they had been welcomed by the local fishermen until a stranger named Kebenaran Khas, claiming to be a government official, showed up and started telling them that these immigrants were going to take their jobs, destroy the fishing and violate their religion. With sentiment turning against them the immigrants who were already on the island fled southeast along the coast to a heavy jungle area where they could hide, and new refugees soon learned where to go.

By the time that Ryuhiko arrived Kebenaran Khas had so enraged the local residents that they were hunting and killing the refugees from Pulau Sulu. It didn't take Shinmasa long to find Kebenaran, and it didn't take any time listening to the man rant and rave about the evil Pulau Suluians and how they must be destroyed to recognize this provocateur as a human manifestation of Mmolai Botle.

“These aliens will take our jobs and destroy our fishing. Their island isn't sinking. They are just saying that so they can take what is yours. Are you going to tolerate that?”

The crowd yelled “No! No!”

“These aliens,” he continued, “will be around your children. They are infidels. Who knows what blasphemy they might teach your children. Do you want them talking to your children?”

“No! No!” the audience again yelled.

“Are you going to tolerate them around your women and children?” The crowd responded as expected and Kebenaran smiled an evil smile.

“They take your jobs, destroy your fishing, and violate the one true religion. What does the Prophet say of such infidels?”

“Kill the infidels!” the crowd began to chant. Kebenaran raised his arms in encouragement and the crowd chanted louder.

Shinmasa worked to get close to the hate preacher. After one of Kebenaran's rallies he was working the crowd. Shinmasa made his way up to the front and feigned being pushed into the politician as he drew near. Shinmasa caught a slight whiff of putrescine. A shiver of disgust passed through him.

As Shinmasa regained his balance he stood up face to face with Kebenaran. He looked into the imposter's eyes. There was nothing. At least there was nothing until their hands touched. When Kebenaran's hand touched Shinmasa's Kebenaran received a shock. The look of recognition, the hatred and pure evil, filled his eyes. Shinmasa wondered whether or not those around them could see his eyes. Kebenaran pulled his hand away quickly.

“The Master was right,” said Mmolai softly. “All I had to do was waste a few useless natives and you'd come running.” He paused to smile and shake the hand of a supporter then turned back to Shinmasa with a smirk, “Or did you fly, Ryuhiko?”

“It's over,” Shinmasa said. “I'm going to stop you.”

“Hush young dragon,” Mmolai said while still smiling, waving and shaking hands with well-wishers, “all I have to do is identify you as 'one of them' and you will die right now.”

“If you didn't have some reason to keep me here or let me live, you'd have already sicked them on me.”



Shinmasa turned and walked away. He didn't really know how he was going to stop Mmolai. His manifestation as Kebenaran had popular support and would keep it as long as he could maintain their hatred and anger. Shinmasa could try to expose his lies but no one was willing to doubt him. He was playing the religion card.

That's the interesting thing about religion, thought Shinmasa. A truly evil person can easily use religion because people are afraid to doubt, question or contradict what they are saying. Many religious documents from the Abrahamic religions end with statements threatening hell and damnation if the person reading the document doubts it.

Shinmasa thought about a friend of his who was a Christian seminary professor with a PhD in both Old and New Testament. One day a Christian door-knocker stopped at the professor's home. When the professor opened the door they started their spiel. Without telling them that he was a seminary professor he started replying to their memorized statements and proof texting with his own “biblical quotes”. The only difference was that the professor was making them up. The evangelizer could do nothing but agree with the professor because he was afraid to doubt, question or contradict. If it would turn out that, in this case, the professor was correct, it would be evident that they didn't really know all about their religion or they might go to hell.

In Ulster, commonly known as Northern Ireland, a man named Ian Pasley wanted to incite the public against those who wanted Ulster to be a part of the Republic of Ireland. The Republican Irish in Ulster were almost all Roman Catholic. Pasley knew that he couldn't keep people excited or angry over politics, but with religion he could kindle such hatred that people would kill for him. He founded his own “Protestant” church, proclaimed himself ordained and started preaching hatred against those

horrible Roman Catholics. Since most Roman Catholics were Republican Irish he had accomplished his political goal with the use of religion.

Such a common ploy, and now Mmolai Botle, Lefu's evil servant, was using that ploy in the most classic manner. In any case, playing the religion card always works. How was Shinmasa to get around it?

Shinmasa spent the night with the Pulai Sulu refugees. As Shinmasa he had gathered a great deal of food and other supplies and taken them to an isolate clearing near the village. Once it was safe Shinmasa transformed to Ryuhiko and carried the load to a small clearing deep in the jungle about a mile and a half south of the village near where the refugees were hiding.

Ryuhiko made no attempt to hide himself. The refugees saw him land and were hiding in the nearby jungle watching him. He turned toward them.

"My name is Ryuhiko," he called to them. "I will not harm you. In fact, I have brought you food and supplies."

"Why should we trust you?" one of the refugees finally dared to reply.

"I have seen your plight and come to help," said Ryuhiko. "You know the stories of the protector dragons."

"They were just that," said the refugee. "Stories that our parents and grandparents told us."

"Perhaps now that you've seen me you might think they were not just made up for children." Ryuhiko transformed back to Shinmasa. "Besides this food is real and good and you have no one else you can trust."

A man came out of the jungle and walked toward Shinmasa. He was tall and slender with dark skin and wearing a pair of torn up shorts that were

little more than a loin cloth. Shinmasa could hear others calling warnings to him as he approached Shinmasa.

“Are you the leader?” asked Shinmasa.

“No,” said the man looking over his shoulder, “just the only one crazy enough to walk up to a man who was just a dragon.”

Shinmasa smiled. “I'm glad you took the risk. You can show the others that I'm really a friend and want to help.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why would you want to help us? Everyone else here wants to kill us.”

“Because I know the one who started all this and I'm going to stop him.”

The man was now close and Shinmasa smiled and held out his hand.

“Wouldn't you like to be able to go home?”

“Can you stop our island from sinking?” asked the man who now held Shinmasa's outstretched hand.

“Kebenaran is right about one thing. Your island isn't sinking. The sea is rising. If I can stop the one who is causing this then hopefully the sea will stop rising and you can go home.”

“That would be wonderful. What can I do to help?”

“Tell the others that I am a friend. Have them carry the food and supplies back to your camp and offer me a place to sleep tonight.”

“Done!” The man turned and called to the others who were now near enough to the edge of the jungle that Shinmasa could see them. With obvious hesitation the others came toward the two men and the pile of food and supplies. You could almost see the sight of the desperately needed food overcome their fear of the dragon turn man. Each in turn

bowed, thanked Shinmasa, took a load of food and headed back into the jungle.

One man stopped after picking up a large bundle. “My parents told us stories about akai ryu,” he said, “but I always thought they were just stories. Thank you!” With that he followed the others into the jungle.

Their camp was not far from the clearing. Groups of huts and lean-tos gathered around fires. Children played in the jungle while women were tending the fires, making basket and other necessities. They jumped up excitedly when they saw the men returning with food.

The refugees had a thanksgiving feast that evening. Each of them had come to Shinmasa and expressed their personal appreciation. After the meal the people told Shinmasa about their experiences.

They recounted how their homes had been flooded, how the people of Jambongan Island had attacked them and they had fled to this place. They also shared stores of those who had not made it. There was the boat load of people who had been chased down by Jambongan fishermen in boats. The Jambogonians had sunk the Pulau Suluian boat and left the people in the water to drown. A young pregnant woman was stoned to death when she entered the village without her head covered, and a man was beheaded for talking to a Jambonganian child. They couldn't understand what was different. The Pulau Suluians had frequently visited and often traded with the villages on Jambongan. Why were they now filled with hatred? Shinmasa told them about Kebenaran Khas and tried to explain how he was using their religion to create hatred but did not try to explain who Kebenaran really was.

The next day there was another horrendous storm followed shortly by more refugees. Shinmasa spent hours sitting on the beach trying to think of how he was going to stop Kebenaran.

One of the refugees asked him why he didn't just turn into a dragon and scare the Jambonganians. Shinmasa explained how Kebenaran would just call him a devil and turn it into more evidence of how evil the Pulau Suluans really were. But that gave him an idea.

The following morning Shinmasa said good-bye to the refugees, transformed into Ryuhiko and headed toward the village.

He landed outside the house where Kebenaran was staying and called to him.

“Mmolai Botle, come out.” People gathered around as Ryuhiko waited. A couple of brave men tried to shoot Ryuhiko with a bow and arrow and an old shotgun. Ryuhiko just gave them an angry look and told them to quit. “Mmolai Botle, come out. Are you afraid of me?”

“That is the home of Kebenaran Khas,” one old man shouted.

“Kebenaran Khas is an imposter,” Ryuhiko told the growing crowd. “His real name is Mmolai Botle and he is a daemon who has been using you to kill innocent people.”

The crowd muttered disapprovingly.

Finally Mmolai appeared. He appeared calm and filled with self-confidence, but Ryuhiko could see into the daemon's eyes. They were filled with anger, hatred and agitation.

“I've been telling these good people all about you, Mmolai Botle,” Ryuhiko stirred the anger and moved closer to the evil spirit. “They don't believe me, but you'll tell them the truth won't you?”

“My good friends, here you see the true nature of the Pulau Suluans,” Mmolai became quite theatrical. “Take a good look and know why you must be strong against them.”

“Oh, come on, Mmolai,” Ryuhiko continued to taunt him, “tell them who you really are. Show them the real you.”

Ryuhiko was getting quite close to Mmolai and he could see the concern on Mmolai's face. Mmolai didn't dare let the people see him as Mmolai Botle, the evil spirit servant of the spirit of death. Ryuhiko started physically pushing Mmolai. Each time he touched the evil spirit sparks flew. The pain was showing on Mmolai's face and the anger growing in his eyes.

“How's it going to serve your master to let me destroy you right in front of these humans?” Ryuhiko started to heckle the evil spirit. “No, you're not staying in the form of Kebenaran because you don't want them to see the real you. You're afraid. You're terrified of my power.” Ryuhiko kept physically pushing Mmolai. “You know that I can easily destroy you and you're scared. You're staying in the form of Kebenaran because you're hoping that I won't destroy you in human form.” Ryuhiko started pushing harder and the harder he pushed the greater the sparks. The people in the crowd started yelling at Ryuhiko, praying for their god to stop him, and throwing things at him. “Well if you think I'm not going to destroy you because you look like a human, you're wrong . . . dead wrong!”

Ryuhiko put on a great act of pulling back his claw and reaching for Kebenaran. Before Ryuhiko could bring the powerful claw down on the human there was a cloud of smoke around Kebenaran followed by the stench of putrescine. Then before them stood the evil spirit Mmolai Botle in all his grotesque evilness. The crowd backed away even farther. Some women fainted and people began to vomit at the stench.

“Behold your pious leader,” Ryuhiko proclaimed in a loud voice. “See the one who has been telling you to kill innocent people.” Mmolai began to swing violently at Ryuhiko who easily ducked the attack. “Is this the faithful follower of your prophet or servant of your god?” By this time

Mmolai was in such a rage that he was swinging wildly. “He tricked you into doing his foul deeds for him. In the name of this evil one you slaughtered innocent people.”

Mmolai Botle lunged at Ryuhiko. Ryuhiko struck with all the force he could muster. There was an enormous flash of brilliant light immediately followed by a violent explosion. Mmolai screamed in pain. His grotesque form launched upward by the power of their encounter. Hanging above Ryuhiko and the crowd of people he screamed at Ryuhiko, “You may have won this one, but you haven't seen the last of Mmolai Botle.”

The people stood starring. They were trying to comprehend what they had just witnessed. Ryuhiko could hear them talking among themselves.

“He tricked you,” Ryuhiko said to the people. “He made you do his bidding by making you think he was a faithful servant of Allah when his real master is the evil spirit of death. He got you to kill innocent people who wanted only a safe place to wait out the storms so they could go home.”

The Jambonganians just stood and watched as Ryuhiko rose above the crowd and flew off. He stopped by the refugee camp to tell them about his encounter with Mmolai and suggest that they might be able to return home soon.

Ryuhiko returned to his mountain lair. A few weeks later the people of Pulau Sulu returned to their island followed a short while later by people from Jambongan offering to help them rebuild their homes.

As Ryuhiko flew home he was totally unaware of the dark figure that followed at a distance.



**A**fter returning from dealing with Mmolai Botle, Shinmasa worked even harder at preparing for his inevitable conflict with Lefu Sefefo. But as he practiced and prepared he kept thinking about the white light which came from his father when he destroyed one of the evil creatures. He had asked Moru. She knew only that it seemed to be unique to Ryutada. Shinmasa had noticed that, when Ryuhiko touched Mmolai, Mmolai received what seemed like an electrical shock and when he struck the evil spirit hard there was the release of tremendous force, but no white light and definitely not lethal. His father had told him that it would be there when he needed and that he would learn how to focus it. His father had specifically said “you will learn how to focus it through ....” but never finished his sentence.

Shinmasa continued to meditate late into the night often visiting the space between the frames of time where he was so close to sunyata. Most meditators go there to find sunyata. Shinmasa went there in the hopes that he again would encounter his father. He still had many questions. The problem was that as soon as he brought his mind to focus on the questions he wanted to ask his father he interrupted his meditation.

Shinmasa and Moru spent many evenings sitting on the ledge talking about their dreams and hopes as they admired the vista before them. Shin had been thinking a lot about Moru, and not in a fellow colleague or spirit of nature way. Many times he had caught himself thinking 'what if I were



just to . . . ?' and then would scrap the thought. He worried that she would get angry.

Even though he knew that she cared deeply about him as the akai ryu, she had given him no indicators of any other interest apart from scientific enquiry. What did she think of him as a human? What did she think of Shinmasa? He worried about rejection. He had only ever had one serious girlfriend. She got tired of the trips to the mountains and left him. He hadn't taken rejection well. This time, however, there was no such thinking. Shin just turned without warning, took Moru in his arms and kissed her full upon the lips.

As he held her tight with his lips pressed against hers there was a terrifying moment of rigidity. She didn't move. It was as though she was instantly frozen. She didn't push him away nor did she return the kiss. He didn't dare pull away to see what was happening.

Finally Moru put her arms around his neck and returned his kiss. For an untold glorious time the two embraced and kissed passionately. Shinmasa's brain was on overload. All he could think about was expressing his pent-up compassion in this one kiss.

Suddenly Moru pulled away. "I can't," she cried.

Shinmasa staggered backwards. His mouth gaped open. He had almost expected to be rejected but that didn't help the shock and devastation.

"What?" he stammered. "Why?" He stood there trying to find words as Moru turned away and cried. Shinmasa stepped up behind her and put his hand on her shoulder in an attempt to comfort and understand but she only cried harder at his touch.

“I purposely found you at the White Valley Mountain camp,” Moru blubbered. She took a few moments attempting to compose herself and continue her story. “I purposely found you and I took on this form so that it would be pleasing to you.” She hung her head as she softly said, “I guess I seduced you.”

“Seduced me?” The idea was foreign to Shinmasa. Beautiful women didn't seduce him. “Didn't you feel anything?”

“Of course I did! I was very moved by your dedication to the mountains and your work,” Moru tried to smile. “I wanted so much to tell you who I was when you started talking about the mountains being alive.” A timid smile appeared. “And I did think you were awfully cute.”

“I didn't fall for your looks,” insisted Shinmasa. “Yes, you're beautiful but I'm so accustomed to beautiful women looking right past me that I never thought of being with you until you spoke. I fell in love with the beautiful woman who was so passionate about nature and had such a pure and loving heart. Did you fake that?”

“Of course not!” Moru started to cry again and Shinmasa apologized in the hopes it would stop the crying.

“That *is* who I really am. And I loved being with you and watching you. And I loved kissing you just now.” There was a pause. “Did you know that in millions of years I've never been kissed like that?” Another pause. “Did you know that I sneaked into your tent every night and sat next to you?”

Shinmasa looked surprised.

“I was supposed to protect you and find out if you knew that you are Ryuhiko. I didn't have to sit in your tent to protect you, but I did. I did because I liked being near you. I hated forcing you to know that you are a dragon by jumping off that mountain but I had to after you found evidence that Bafu Nama was hanging around.”

“Was there ever anything more than business?”

“YES!” Moru almost screamed through her tears. “Why the hell do you think I'm crying? Why the hell do you think I always leave your lair at night? I've been around as long as there have been flowers and trees. I knew love but I never knew personal love. There was never any one person who made me feel like this. You made me love you and I don't know what to do!”

“What's wrong with that? I love you too. Doesn't that make it okay?”

“If we were two humans it would.” Moru paused in another attempt to regain her composure. “I'm a spirit and you're a kawizati dragon. How can I do what I'm supposed to do if all I can think about is you? Would my Mother approve? Would our union cause some inconceivable disaster? I just don't know.”

“I don't love my work and the nature I'm determined to protect any less because I love you,” Shinmasa said quietly. “My parents had five children. They loved all five of us with the same intensiveness and never loved each other any less. They always said that there is always enough love to go around.”

Moru turned and hugged Shinmasa tightly. "Please forgive me," she whispered. "I'm frightened and confused. I'm not accustomed to either of those. I have to go think about this."

Once Moru had left Shinmasa went back into the lair. It seemed so cavernous and lonely. He poured himself a couple of fingers of whiskey and walked into his bedroom. Without even taking a sip he put it on the table and crawled into bed.

Moru found herself sitting on Conical Rock, a promontory along the Oregon coast, crying for her sister, Metsia. Metsia was Moru's older sister and the spirit of water. Whenever she had a problem, Moru always knew that Metsia would help her. She could not think straight as she watched the ocean for any sign of her sister.

After a short while a water spout began to develop. It was Metsia. The two sisters embraced and, between the sobs and crying, Moru poured out her heart. She told Metsia how she had fallen in love with a kawizati dragon "in a human way."

"Oh, my," said the older sister squeezing Moru a little tighter. "I don't know much about things like that." After pondering what she had just heard, "you mean you want to engage in . . ."

"yes," interrupted Moru as though the word 'sex' was unspeakable. "Is this really bad? Is Mother going to be furious with me?"

"Mother might not be happy, but she's really quite forgiving," Metsia smiled. "I don't know that it's really all that bad."

"Then you do think that it's bad."

“There seem to be two issues here,” Metsia was deep in thought as she spoke. “We have 'conservation of energy' but I've never heard of 'conservation of love'. There's no reason to think that you can't have a special love for Shinmasa without loving your forest any less.”

“That's basically what Shinmasa said,” Moru thought back to earlier that evening.

“Wise man,” Metsia smiled. “But there is something else that comes to my mind.” She paused to find the words she wanted. “Are you afraid for Shinmasa or for yourself?”

“What do you mean?”

“How old are you? As long as there are trees and flowers you are not going to die. On the other hand, Ryuhiko will eventually grow old and die. Even if Ryuhiko lives ten thousand years – about the longest any dragon has been known to live – that is a drop in the eternal bucket. Are you afraid that you won't be able to handle that?”

“I'm not sure I thought of that, but I guess that could be a part of my fear of a spirit-kawizati union. Or I might be using our differences so that I don't have to confront that reality.” Moru was now calm and sat pondering what her sister had said. Then she looked up.

“I'm afraid. I've never really been hurt. I've been made very sad and angry with the way many humans treat my forest, but I've grown accustomed to that ever since they started building their concrete jungles. But I've never been directly hurt. To be rejected or to lose him would be a new experience for me that I'm really afraid of.”

“You think about that,” Metsia concluded. “and ask yourself if he is worth the pain you know you will someday suffer. It's just not in your nature to give anything less than 100% to your forest. Besides, that literally IS your life. So I'm not worried about that. I'll run interference with Mother if that becomes necessary but I think she'll just smile and shake her head. You know the reason that she asked you to try to find Ryuhiko is because you have such a way with humans.” They both laughed.

Metsia and Moru sat together for a long time. Being the oldest they had seen so much happen in their lives. Metsia was pushing five billion years. She had been around a long time before Moru who was a mere 700 million years old. They had watched the development of the animal genus homo. They had watched it become the homo sapiens idaltu and the homo sapiens sapiens which left their native Africa and headed to all points on the planet.

Me Talhaho had been concerned about that. As long as they were an insignificant species minding their own business in Africa everything was okay. The only reason that they hadn't become extinct from predators is that they learned to cooperate in large groups. That was also a problem. At least it was a problem for the rest of the world. The homo genus quickly started crediting good and bad fortune to deities and in less than 190,000 years from leaving Africa the homo sapiens started coming up with gods who liked one group better than another and humans being gods or the offspring of gods. This was a bad turn of events.

As they separated themselves from the rest of nature – moving away from being hunter/gatherers and farmers – they began to more and more

attempt to subjugate each other and everything else in the world. Now they were destroying more of the earth in a year than previous homo sapiens had done in a millennium or more. That's when Metsia, Moru and their sisters' jobs really turned tough. Now it was a fight for survival.

“You know, Metsia,” Moru said sadly, “there's a good chance that Ryuhiko will outlive me.” She paused and looked at her sister. “Sometimes I think we're fighting a losing battle. Look at your poor oceans and rivers and streams. Where can you find pure water? And my poor forest. I'm losing several thousands of acres a day. No, I don't think I have to worry about outliving Ryuhiko.”

Metsia sat silently. She couldn't bring herself to argue her sister's point. She couldn't because she had no evidence to the contrary and she couldn't because she too believed as her sister.

“I wonder,” she said softly, “Is there a point at which there is no recovery?”

They tried to change the subject to things less depressing but it was hard. They talked about their sisters. Moru told Metsia about the lair Thabeng had made for Ryuhiko and some of her outlandish costumes and behavior. They laughed because they both loved it when Thabeng was outlandish. Moru also told Metsia about Shinmasa.

“I'd better go back and talk to Shinmasa,” Moru concluded.

“Sounds like a good idea to me,” Metsia agreed. “Tell him your sister admires him.”



**S**hinmasa couldn't sleep. All he could do was lay there and think about Moru. The glass of whiskey still sat, untasted, on the table.

Perhaps, he thought, what made it worse was that she had said she was in love with him. Was he being unreasonable or selfish to want a spirit to love him in a way beyond her love for nature? He had fallen in love with her long before he knew her real identity. Was there some devastating fate that would befall them if they were to be mates?

Hour after hour he lay there and thought. Question after question with no answers. Not even a good idea. Then he started worrying about how he was going to deal with being around her and working with her knowing that they had to bury their true feelings. 'It would have hurt a lot more but it would have been so much easier in the long run if she had just said she wasn't interested,' thought Shinmasa.

There was almost no light in Shinmasa's bedroom. He hadn't turned on any lights when he went in. There didn't seem to be any reason for lights. He didn't hear Moru enter. She walked quietly to the side of the bed before she realized that Shinmasa was not asleep.

"May I come in?" she asked softly.

"Of course," said Shinmasa. He tried to see her in the darkened room. She was standing with her back to what little light there was so all he could see was a silhouette. It didn't strike him that she was wearing a long



flowing gown. All that mattered to him was that she had come back. Even if she would not be his lover, he would at least have her near.

“I'm sorry if I upset you,” Moru spoke in almost a whisper. “I didn't mean to. I don't want to. I mean . . .” There was a long pause as Moru struggled for words.

“It's okay,” said Shinmasa. “I understand. You're a spirit. I'm just a guy.”

“You're not just 'a guy',” Moru voice was a bit stronger. “You're a warm compassionate kawizati and I do love you. I love you in . . . in . . . well, I love you in 'that' way.”

“Are you a prude?” Shinmasa found himself giggling.

“A what?”

“A prude,” Shinmasa repeated. “You can't say 'lover' or 'sex’”

“Do you really want me?” The fear in Moru's voice was evident. By this time Shinmasa was standing toe-to-toe with her.

“Yes. Most definitely. I fell in love with who you are, not what you are. Whether you're an underpaid, powerless scientist or a powerful spirit doesn't matter. You're the same woman I fell in love with on that mountain.”

“Please understand,” said Moru lower her head. “No matter how long I've been around, I know nothing of these matters.” With that said her gown dropped to the floor and the two embraced.



“Oh, excuse me!” said a very embarrassed Catherine.

Each day after Shinmasa left she would go into his room and gather the inevitable dirty dishes and laundry. This morning she had assumed that he had left early because he was always gone by 8 am so she had done her usual perfunctory tap on the door and walked in. Unaccustomed as she was to human modesty, Moru just sat up in surprise while Shinmasa grabbed for a nearby corner of sheet.

“I am so very, very sorry!” Catherine backed out of the room.

Moru and Shinmasa looked at each other. Then one of them began to snicker. That was all it took. They found themselves embracing as they laughed hysterically.

As Moru and Shinmasa's laughing and giggling turned into foreplay, a dark figure sat on the summit of Mt George a few miles away looking toward the lair. Bafu Nama had witnessed the defeat of Mmolai Botle and had followed Ryuhiko back to his lair. As he sat and watched Ryuhiko's lair he made a very deadly mistake. He decided that he wouldn't tell his master, Lefu Sefefo, about the lair but would forever be in his master's good graces because he would kill the akai ryu. Now he was sitting there thinking about how he was going to accomplish such a feat.

That evening, as Shinmasa was practicing his jo skills on the ledge, Bafu Nama decides to make his move. He felt that he had the advantage. After all, Ryuhiko was in his human form and standing totally open to attack. He flew as fast as he could toward the solitary figure.

Shinmasa was caught off guard. As Bafu rapidly approached Shinmasa caught a sniff of putrescine and cadaverine. Shinmasa knew that smell but before he could react Bafu hit him, knocking him down but not off the ledge.

Moru had been watching Shinmasa practice from just inside the lair. She too had smelled the foul odor of putrescine and cadaverine and looked up to see Shinmasa fall just as he was struck by Bafu. She jumped up and started to run to his aid but before she could arrive he had transformed into Ryuhiko. All of the practice had paid off. He was standing on the ledge watching Bafu.

He appeared completely relaxed which belied the taut, well-trained muscles waiting for his adversary's attack. Still grasped in his left claw was his jo. But it no longer looked like the four foot jo with which Shinmasa had practiced so much. It was as tall as Ryuhiko and shown a brilliant white like the white of the hottest flame. Ryuhiko looked at the jo and held it up for Moru to see. It was his Father's jo through which he would learn to focus the power.

Bafu paused for a moment as he turned around for another pass. Ryuhiko had never seen Bafu Nama and was repulsed by the creature who was heading toward him. Putrescine and cadaverine were actually quite

descriptive of what he saw. Bafu appeared to be nothing more than an extremely large blob of rotting flesh. Ryuhiko could not make out a face, appendages or weapon. How was this creature planning to kill him?

“Watch out,” cried Moru. “He can spit a caustic acid.”

“Oh, that's nice,” Ryuhiko replied sarcastically. “Anything else you'd like to share?”

“He is very toxic,” responded Moru. “He's not really very good at direct combat. His forte is smothering you in your sleep.”

“Nice guy,” said Ryuhiko as he watched the approaching creature.

Bafu's idea was to knock Shinmasa off the ledge and then smother him as he lay broken at the bottom of the cliff. It wasn't going nearly as well as Bafu had imagined it. Now he was face to face with a dragon. He decided that his only chance of success was to fly right into the dragon's face and attempt to smother him as he stood there. As he drew near he saw the jo. It was too late to pull up and run.

As he approached, Bafu opened up his body to make the largest area possible to engulf Ryuhiko's head. When Bafu was just feet away Ryuhiko rose up and backhanded the creature with a mighty claw. Bafu was stunned, spinning and bouncing across the ledge and finally falling into the valley below.

Ryuhiko rose in the air, bent at the waist and went head first into the valley after Bafu. Bafu was far from intelligent but he knew when to give up and run. He tried desperately to pull himself together and headed down

the valley away from the lair. If he could only survive he would tell his master. Lefu would know what to do with this dragon.

Vance Mountain was one of the higher mountains in the area. It had been created by three glaciers. One created the valley on it's west side with two cirques on the northeast and southeast. From above it presented as an upside down Y with knife edged ridges. Bafu was lifting up over the western ridge when he was hit by Ryuhiko and fell to the ground near the mountain's summit.

Bafu Nama stood up. He was dazed and confused. He looked around and saw Ryuhiko setting down a few yards away. Bafu knew that he was defeated. He couldn't out run or out fight this dragon.

“Go tell your master that I'm coming for him,” said Ryuhiko.

Bafu Nama knew that his master would be extremely angry and may, in his anger, destroy Bafu. He believed that he had no other choice than to attempt to finish what he had come to accomplish. Bafu threw himself at Ryuhiko.

Ryuhiko thrust with his jo. When the jo entered Bafu Nama's body Bafu immediately began to turn a bright white until he exploded.

Ryuhiko stood for a moment and said quietly, “or don't.”

Moru was standing on the ledge waiting for Ryuhiko. She had seen the explosion and believed that he had prevailed against Bafu, but she still stood anxiously waiting. This, she thought, is how humans feel so often. She was frightened. Frightened like a human. It was more than mere

worry. It was painful. It was a pain she couldn't describe coming from her very core. When Ryuhiko could be seen approaching the sense of relief, joy, love was like a wave of comforting balm. 'How do animals function with all of these emotions?' She thought.

Ryuhiko transformed into Shinmasa immediately upon landing on the ledge and the two embraced. Shinmasa explained what had happened.

“It's the jo!” Shinmasa concluded his account.

“The jo?”

“Yes, this is my father's jo,” Shinmasa explained. “It carries the power. I've had it with me all along.”

Moru felt skeptical but smiled as Shinmasa spoke. She had seen his father fight many times and, while he did carry the jo, it didn't seem to be the source of his great power.

“And I know how Lefu is going to try to destroy North America.”

“You do?” Moru was excited. She forgot about the jo.

“Yes,” Shinmasa was exuberant. “He's going to try to poison the Triple Divide.”



**A**s Bafu Nama made his ill fated attack Lefu was half way around the world watching the carnage of war in the Middle East and drawing strength from the anger and hatred. He was enjoying himself. He had flamed the fires of distrust and religious difference into anger and hatred and was gleefully cheering both sides as two groups of Muslims were butchering each other in the name of the same god. Lefu could feel the power surge through his body as the battle became more violent and more gruesome.

Lefu's pleasure was interrupted by a strong sense of sudden loss. 'Bafu!' Lefu thought. 'That idiot has done something stupid. He's dead.' Ryuhiko was getting stronger faster than Lefu had anticipated. Then, Lefu thought, there was the possibility that the dragon prince had figured out his plan. That didn't matter as much as the timing. Actually he wanted Ryuhiko to figure it out in time to be there when Lefu brought about the beginning of the end of life in North America. He wanted to torture the young prince and make him suffer. That would give him great strength and it would torture his family, especially his sister, Moru. He wouldn't have to physically defeat the young dragon. The pain, the sorrow, the failure would destroy him. The thought made Lefu smile.

Lefu decided that he must act quickly. He sat looking at the gore and a smile came to his face. He needed distractions to keep Ryuhiko busy until he was ready for him. He looked around the world. There was so much angry and hatred. There was so much distrust, blame, self-centeredness. Lefu was so happy with his handiwork. It gave him many options.

There. Lefu saw a police officer approaching a young black man in Birmingham, Alabama. Lefu had been feeding off this type of situation

for years so it took very little to instigate a confrontation that left the young black man lying dead. Soon a riot ensued.

Oh, yes, thought Lefu. There are refugees trying to get their families to someplace safe. 'Sorry,' Lefu said out loud. 'Not today.' He grinned as he stirred hatred, suspicion and anger among some locals. The police and military are losing their tempers because they are trying to keep the refugees out while not allowing the locals to hurt the refugees and they're getting totally disgusted with the entire situation.

Lefu was having great fun and he was only starting. He would be having the heir to the dragon king's throne so busy trying to bring calm that he wouldn't notice what Lefu was doing until it was too late. That's when Lefu wanted Ryuhiko to show up . . . when it was too late.



**I**n the lair Shinmasa suddenly sat up in bed with a gasp.

“What is it?” Moru said rolling over and looking up at Shinmasa.

“It's starting,” Shinmasa said looking around as though he expected to see something or find something.

“Lefu?”

“Yes. He's starting trouble,” said Shinmasa.

“You know he always does that,” said Moru sitting up and putting her hand on Shinmasa's shoulder.



“No this is different,” Shinmasa shook his head. “He's ready.”

“How can you be sure?”

“I can feel it. These situations aren't for his entertainment or to gain power. They are to draw me away so that he can make his attack.”

Moru knew that as Ryuhiko grew in power, he was more and more attuned to what Lefu was doing. He seemed to always know where Lefu was at any time. He would feel . . . he could sense Lefu. It was as though Ryuhiko being Lefu's opposite created a common link. The two of them had become like yin and yang.

This worried Moru. Could Ryuhiko survive destroying Lefu? Even worse, could it be that the destruction of Ryuhiko was what was necessary to bring about the destruction of Lefu? Moru didn't want to consider such possibilities but they haunted her.

“These are distractions,” Shinmasa said turning to Moru. “I'll bet anything if I head toward one of these trouble spots there will be an unbelievably severe storm go across the Triple Divide.” Shinmasa paused and looked away in thought. “He wants me to realize what he's doing but be so far away that the deed is done by the time I arrive.”

“Metsia!” Moru suddenly exclaimed.

“Who?” Shinmasa asked.

“My sister, Metsia, is the spirit of the ocean,” Moru smiled broadly while Shinmasa looked totally lost. “To force Lefu to make his move while you're still close enough to stop him, we have to make him think his distractions worked. You can start toward Birmingham. You both seem

to be able to sense the other. We'll have Metsia send a heavy tropical storm in from the Gulf to dampen things in Birmingham. Hopefully Lefu will think that you have been distracted and start his attack. You will actually be close enough to be there when he arrives at the Triple Divide.”

Shinmasa pondered the idea for a few moments. It could work. He certainly didn't have any other ideas. Moru left immediately to contact her sister while Shinmasa went out on the ledge to meditate before his great battle with Lefu Sefefo, the greatest evil the world had ever known. As he moved deeper and deeper into his meditative trance his body began to glow until he was a brilliant white.



Ryuhiko stood on the Triple Divide Peak looking down the long valley of Hudson Bay Creek toward Red Eagle lake. He was well above the tree-line. The trees created a cushion of green far below him. A palette of greens and browns topped by the stark vertical linear lines of massive Mount James and Norris Mountain on each side of him. At the end of the valley was Red Eagle Mountain standing like a giant fortress with a rainbow crossing it like a sash. In the distance he could see the approaching storm. It was time. He looked down at his hand. It was just a jo decorated with runes. How had he come to this? Sunyata. In Sunyata he had seen the oneness. He now understood.

Ryuhiko looked at the approaching storm. Lefu Sefefo was manifest in the storm. Ryuhiko had seen this face before. It was many times worse than the one he had experienced with Moru when he first learned that he was Ryuhiko. That seemed like so long ago. It was a terrifying storm but now Ryuhiko was strong and prepared.

“I know who you really are and how you plan to kill North America,” Ryuhiko called to the storm. “You plan to poison the Triple Divide. That will poison the water in all of North America. It won't be fast but eventually the land and all living things will die.”

Lefu laughed. It was a hideous laugh. It was a laugh that defined hatred and evil. Time and again what appeared as lightening flashed toward Ryuhiko but each time he reflects it with his jo. In a rage Lefu sent multiple attacks at one time hitting and striking Ryuhiko. Time and again Ryuhiko is pushed from the top of the Triple Divide into the deep valley south of the peak. Each time he returns the storm is closer and each time he is greeted by Lefu's terrifying laugh.

“You are no match for me, little prince,” Lefu taunted. “You will stand there pathetically fighting my storm as I destroy your precious earth.”

Ryuhiko paid no attention to Lefu's taunt but it did make him realize that standing right on the Triple Divide wasn't good strategy. He must fight from someplace where Lefu must get past him. Ryuhiko moved to the peak of Split Mountain. Now Lefu must literally get past Ryuhiko.

Ryuhiko's jo was brighter than he'd ever seen and the glow was moving through Ryuhiko's claws into his body. No, the young dragon prince suddenly realized. It wasn't moving from the jo to Ryuhiko. It was

moving from Ryuhiko to the jo. This is what his father had meant. Ryuhiko was the light. Not the jo.

“I know now,” said Ryuhiko, “the source of the light. Lefu's face grew dark. “Yes, you know it too and you were hoping that I'd not figure it out. The brilliant light is the manifestation of the total of all hope, love, compassion and goodness in existence. Like the law of conservation of energy, these elements go from reality to potential. The potential for them is always there. This is the oneness which you have attempted to pervert. I'm the yang to your yin. I'm the dragon standing on a mountain filled with light and life. But you want the duality to continue. If people were to understand the oneness of the universe you would cease to control them.”

As Ryuhiko spoke Lefu's face grew darker until it was almost featureless. “You are but a collection of negative energy gleaned from the fears, angers, and hatred of people. But we are all connected. We are all one. So technically, I must accept these negative emotions. But what if I have made friends with my emotions – positive and negative? What if I can give that hope to a handful of others who pass it along, and so forth? Would this little spot here turn clear and beautiful?”

As he spoke Ryuhiko pointed his hand at the edge of Lefu's terrible storm and a small area turned white. Lefu's rage grew but made no difference to Ryuhiko. “Would that not grow exponentially? How long until your storm of hate and fear became like a gentle summer shower or a fresh winter's snowfall?” Ryuhiko pointed and the white area began to grow.

“This can't be happening,” shouted Lefu.

“Of course it can,” replied Ryuhiko. “Is this your reality or mine?”

With that said Ryuhiko flew directly into the heart of the storm as Lefu Sefefo yelled “no” and attempted to back away. But the storm could not move fast enough.

All goes black.



**S**hinmasa awakened to see his Father sitting next to him. It hurt, but he struggled through his pain and stood up. He looked around. He was on top of the mountain but, looking down, he could see Ryuhiko lying at the foot of Split Mountain.

“Am I dead?” he asked his father.

“You could be,” his father answered.

“What do you mean by that?”

“You have a choice. You can be dead and be free from the endless battle with Lefu or you can accept the Bodhisattva way. You know that humans are not strong enough to deal with him on their own. You stopped him today but, if you accept death, they will die tomorrow.”

Shinmasa thought of the Buddhist Bodhisattva prayer he had recited so many times.

*May I be a guard for those who need protection, a guide for those on the path, a boat, a raft, a bridge for those who wish to cross the flood. May I be a lamp in the darkness, a resting place for the weary, a healing medicine for all who are sick, a vase of plenty, a tree of miracles, and for the boundless multitudes of living beings. May I bring sustenance and awakening. Enduring like the earth and sky until all beings are freed from sorrow And all are awakened.*

Shinmasa realized that he was on the bodhisattva way. He and his father stood facing each other.

“I am proud of you, my son.” said the dragon king. “You have won a great victory and learn a greater lesson. But you know you have not stopped Lefu but for a moment. He will continue to spread his cloud of anger and hatred, bigotry and discrimination, and all things foul and demeaning to humanity. He will continue until humanity understands the oneness of all things.”

The two men embraced. As Ryutada faded from view, Shinmasa looked down at Ryuhiko lying at the bottom of the mountain. There was a figure kneeling next to the dragon. It was Moru. She was weeping. 'There was another good reason to return,' thought Shinmasa. He closed his eyes.

When he opened them, he was Ryuhiko lying on the ground. Moru cried and hugged and kissed him. He hurt all over. He didn't want to get up. But he did. He had chosen the bodhisattva way and he had the Spirit of the Forest to walk it with him.