Jaimon and Bug (an unpublished unedited chapter from The Dragon Rider)

Jaimon Schafer turned around and stood on a high bluff at the edge of the Quentis mountains looking south towards the meadowlands. His best friend, Bug, had preceded him up the mountain and now stood next to him. At fourteen, Jaimon was proud to have already grown a long pony tail of hair almost to his waist. Brown in color, the ends floated around in the mountain breeze. He had a boyish face that already hinted of the man he would become. Clear, blue eyes, set above his high cheek bones, indicative of his fellow countrymen, sparkled at the sight below. He loved the mountains and meadow lands of his country. Born at the foot of the mountains to loving parents, he and his father cared for a herd of sheep.

"This is higher than I've ever been," Bug said. The name was a throwback to the many bugs he'd collected as a young boy.

Jaimon's smile, wide and full of laughter, was infectious. "Isn't it wonderful?" He leaned out further on the rock and gazed down across the meadowlands. "I wish I could fly from here. Wouldn't it be grand, bug?"

Bug pulled on the back of Jaimon's shirt, dragging him away from the edge. "You'll get yourself killed out there, Jaimon. No one can fly, you know that."

The two boys brought the flock of sheep up to the mountain's edge to graze on longer grass before having to make the trek further south to warmer grasslands for the winter. They would stay with the sheep for three days before returning home. This was the first year Jaimon's father allowed them to go alone without Jaimon's older brothers accompanying them. It was an adventure they both had been looking forward to the entire summer and early fall. The sheep didn't take much work, so during the day, the boys filled their time with swimming in cool mountain streams and climbing up higher in the mountains.

"Let's go higher," Jaimon said with excitement in his young voice. He started running up the next slope.

"Wait for me," Bug called after him. "It's harder to breath up here."

"You're out of shape, Bug. It's all that sitting around making furniture with your dad all summer. You need to get out more."

The grassy ground soon turned rocky as their climb took them higher and higher. The

temperature started to cool, but was not yet cold. Jaimon loved the out of doors. Being outside with the sheep on the meadowlands was great, but being up in the mountains brought a deeper excitement. He imagined being anything he wanted to be. Someday he wanted to go to the Bay of Ghazi and see the ocean; that was his next quest, then maybe east to the Southern Forest. Each would hold its own beauty and majesty. He always imagined what it all would look like from above.

Soon the boys reached another peak, this one more jagged and rocky than the last. One of the rock outcroppings jutted out over the edge and Jaimon walked toward it.

"Are you crazy, Jaimon?" asked Bug. His own ponytail was not as long as Jaimon's, but nevertheless floated behind him with a stronger wind than down below. He grabbed the end and held it in his hand to keep it from flapping in his face. Bug had lighter hair and more freckles than Jaimon, but they stood at about the same height. The two boys had been friends since either could remember. Both had born in the same village about 10 miles south of the mountains, along the Ghazi River.

Jaimon ignored his friend. "You never have fun if you didn't take risks." Step by step he stood out on the rock. The wind pushed against his thin but growing body and Jaimon leaned further into the wind, letting it hold his body up. He closed his eyes and put his hands to either side and imagined he flew through the air.

Opening them back up, he watched clouds gathering far to the distant south. The sun stood just a little to the south and west with plenty of daylight left. Walking back off the ledge he shaded his eyes with his hand and gazed further up the mountain.

"I bet there're caves up there," Jaimon said with renewed excitement.

Bug rolled his eyes. "I'm tired. We should be heading back. Looks like a storm is coming."

"Nah. That's nothing. Let's eat something, then head up for a bit." Jaimon opened up a small pack he carried with him and pulled out two apples and a small loaf of bread. "We'll head back down soon. I promise."

"Promise?" Bug eyed the food. "I am hungry."

Both boys laughed. Bug was always hungry. They bit down into the golden delicious apples, one of the many varieties which grew all over their valley. During the autumn harvest apples were plentiful for the boys to pick up and take. After hungrily eating the apples and the

bread, the boys laid down on a dirt slope with their hands behind their heads to rest for a minute. The wind wiped up and over their bodies as they watched white cottony clouds float across the clear blue sky. A hawk flew high overhead and the sound of a few animals scurrying around caught Jaimon's ears before he fell asleep.

Jaimon felt something hit his face and before he opened his eyes, he reached up to wipe it off. It was wet. He opened his eyes and stood up. "Bug, wake up!"

Bug yelled and stood up, disoriented for a moment. "What? What?"

Looking around them, the boys noticed the storm had blown in from the southern Blue Sea quicker than they thought it would. The front edge of the storm was already dropping rain on them. Gathering up his pack, Jaimon motioned for bug to follow him further into the mountains. The wind began to whip around and the temperature of the air dropped quickly. The two only had thin cloaks put into their packs earlier when they began climbing. They now brought them out with the intent to try and keep the rest of their cotton shirts and wool pants dry.

"We need to find a cave!" shouted Jaimon above the wind.

Their feet started slipping on the wet rock and dirt as they climbed higher toward a wider rock. Bug fell once and hit his knee hard, slowing them down more. Huge boulders loomed in front of them, blocking their path. Jaimon put his hands on the smooth stone but couldn't find a good grip and just slipped back. He motioned to Bug that they needed to circle back around the other side of the stones.

By this time, wet flakes of cold started hitting the boy's faces and they started shivering in the growing cold. Jaimon fell and slid down loose gravel, only stopping by grabbing onto a shrub bush with his right hand. It scraped through his fingers as he tried to hang on. Finally he stopped sliding and pulled himself back up to where Bug leaned against a sizeable stone.

"We'll need to go higher." Jaimon grabbed Bug's arm and pulled him away from his rocky backrest.

Finding footholds in the wet proved difficult, but possible. Slowly, Jaimon would climb, then help pull up Bug behind him. His arms ached with the effort, straining young muscles beyond his normal activity level. The only good thing about the cold was the rain was turning into snow and in the short-term wouldn't be so bad on the ground as the water would be. However, in the long-term they needed to get out of the snow or they could be in mortal danger.

A small fox scuttled across a patch of land between two rocks and Jaimon shouted to follow

it. Squeezing between two immense rocks proved harder than it appeared to be. At the top they were far enough apart to fit, but at the bottom the two rocks pinched close into each other. Jaimon put a foot on each side of the stone and tried to walk up higher, doing the splits on the way up. His feet kept slipping down on the slope. Bug followed behind him but tended to keep getting stuck and Jaimon would have to turn back around. After some time and a lot of effort they both got through the rocks, only to find more on the other side.

"I can't do it anymore." Bug leaned against one of the rocks and closed his eyes.

A stream of water ran down Bug's face, and Jaimon didn't know how much was due to the rain and how much to tears. He worried about his friend. There was no way he could carry him over these rocks. Peering around, he tried to figure out which way to go. The snow started to stick and every direction looked the same. He hugged his cloak around his wool shirt and leather pants, trying not to shiver too much. The fox that had run in front of them was long gone and there was no way to know where the small animal now hid.

Pulling a rope out of his pack, Jaimon gave one end to his friend with instructions to keep hold of it, while Jaimon went ahead to scout for shelter. Moving around and over rocks and bushes, he kept hold of the rope. He found a few crevices, but they would be too small for the two boys. He thought about his father and brothers. They would definitely scold him for his stupidity of staying up so late in the mountains. His father told him time and time again the mountains were dangerous. He was fairly certain, however, he could weather the storm if he needed to, but he was worried for Bug. His friend wasn't as sturdy as he was, or as used to physical work and exercise.

Getting to the end of his rope quicker than he planned, Jaimon wiped the snow and water from his eyes. There! Up just a little higher. It looked like an opening. Regretfully having to leave the rope behind he crawled up and over to a ledge. Peering around a corner, he smiled with relief. Finally a cave. Stacking a few rocks on the edge of the rope, he walked along it back to Bug. His friend was sitting down on the ground with his head on his knees, shivering.

"Bug! Bug!" Jaimon kicked his friend. "Get up. I found a cave."

Bug lifted his head and blinked a few times.

"Come on!" Jaimon grabbed Bug's hand and pulled him up. Walking next to the rope over a few of the bulky rocks, soon they came to the end of the rope. Jaimon quickly recoiled it. He didn't know if they might need it again to get out of the mountains. Dragging Bug back up the

next group of rocks, they rounded a narrow ledge and fell inside a small cave. Dragging both of their feet inside with the rest of their bodies, Jaimon took a few moments to rest and breathe deeply.

After a bit of rest, he turned to look inside the cave. It went back further than his eyes could see, but at the edge of his vision there were a few sticks and logs and dead remains of bushes scattered around the cave. Gathering these together, he took out his flint and steel and tried to get a spark.

"You all right?" he asked his friend.

Bug sat up and turned his head towards Jaimon. "Just cold." He hugged his arms around him.

"Working on that right now." Jaimon said.

Finally a small spark lit some leaves he had gathered. With a soft blow of his breath, he caught a dried bush on fire. Once a few pops and crackles were heard, he smiled with relief. After some more work he had a decent fire going and the two boys scooted closer with hands out towards the warm orange flames.

Looking outside, the sky grew darker and Jaimon realized they would be trapped there all night. He thought about the sheep and hoped they would be smart enough to find shelter beneath some trees. It was too warm down on the grasslands to snow, but they would be getting the rain.

Bug threw another log on the fire. His friend's back was to the outside of the cave, and Jaimon watched his face. Bug seemed better already. It would be a long night, but they would be all right.

With a scream of surprise, Bug jumped up off the rocky floor and pointed a finger back deep inside the cave. "What is that?"

Jaimon turned around and stood up, following the gaze of his friend. Reflecting off the orange glow of the brightening fire sat what appeared to be a large, white, slightly iridescent egg sitting at the back of the cave. An egg that was considerably greater than both boys put together.