

2011:
Fortune
of the
Three J's

Jared Yelton

THE COMPLETED TEXT
◆
COLLECTOR'S EDITION

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Preface

Welcome to the somewhat bizarre world of the Three J's. In a tangled web of imagination and experiences, you might begin to perceive a small fraction of our personalities—okay, maybe not. But as purely entertainment, *Fortune of the Three J's* is like a fantastic record of our future, journeying deep into the impossible and soaring well beyond improbable.

Since I started the *Fortune* project in 1993 I have seen so many changes in us that I knew I had to rework some of it. In addition, only half of the entire story had been completed. It has been untouched since I finished the first half in December '93.

This final version contains almost all the previous text with further editing and revisions. I have moved chapters together and added to the old text. Best of all, however, is that it's complete. The conclusion has arrived along with several new chapters of never-before-read text.

The story is barely accurate, based heavily on our high-school predictions of the future. It has been exaggerated and stretched to the limit—for the sole purpose of exaggerating and stretching it. Some principles remain intact and part of our lives, others have drifted to distant corners of our minds.

As all our lives change and take shape, I found a need to complete this work before it was inevitably lost to time's sculpting hands. I write this in Spring 1996: Jared Buttars is serving an LDS mission in Adelaide, Australia and has been gone for about six months. Jamie Forbush is planning soon to depart on one, in the meantime working with communications equipment and training as a junior police officer.

It is my hope that we will remain in contact with each other as friends, unlike the separation that has occurred in the story. We have known each other since fifth and sixth grade. It is amazing

to consider how different we each are, yet how many things we have in common. It is the common ground that has helped us overcome disputes and remain friends.

It is our friendship that provides us great fortune. I hope to have it always.

Part One

Chapter 1

Vision

A pleasant cool air blew through the long hallway of Buttars Vision Studios, USA. The busy sounds of phones and computers came from beyond closed office doors. Through one glass panel, Jared saw a secretary turn on a videophone and begin printing something on a writus sheet. At the end of the hall were two adjacent doors, both with plexiglas windows in the top half of them. A backlit red sign hung above them: *Studios A-D*.

Just then, a short, skinny man emerged from a side door labelled *Janitorial*, almost bumping into him.

“Oh, good morning, Mr. Buttars. How are you doing?” he asked, holding a mop and a small bucket.

“Very fine, thank you. Be sure to get that candy machine filled today, I noticed we were running low on Kit Kat bars,” observed Jared with a serious smile.

“Of course, I’ll get right to that!”

“Thank you, Mr. Cranbule.”

Wayne, the Janitor, set off to clean a tiled intersection of the hallway. Jared straightened his tie and pushed through the two studio doors. He was in yet another hallway, but now a gently curving one opening up to an airy reception area. One of the secretaries looked up. Upon seeing him, she tapped her coworker on the shoulder. “He’s here!” she hissed.

The other secretary turned around and both stood up to greet him. “Hello, Mr. Buttars,” they said.

“Greetings, ladies; Mrs. Jones; Miss Green,” he said, nodding to each.

The secretaries returned to their seats, remaining attentive. “How is your mother, Mrs. Jones?” Jared asked, “Does she still teach AP Computers?”

“Yes, about ready to retire, but still going.”

“Ahh. Very well. Have I any messages?”

“Not today, Mr. Buttars; but your wife called.”

“And?”

“She said to call her back sometime today.”

“Okay.”

“Have a good day!”

Jared turned and continued down the hall. The next door on the right was a twenty-inch wide solid oak door with a beautiful gold letter “A”. This was the entrance to his newsroom studio, where current events in the movie industry were announced to the world over his news program, *Movies and Entertainment On the Wire* (*MEOW* for short). He passed it by, wishing to enter Studio D, where his latest production was in progress.

He passed under a grate where cool air was blowing down from the central air-conditioning system. The rich, carpeted hallway was silent under his feet. A busy technician rushed from a supply room to the Studio B door. He greeted Jared with a short ‘hello’, carrying a cable over his shoulder. He was producing a short television series on computer programming in that one. Studio C wasn’t in use right now, being restored after producing part of his Home Box Office hit, *Day For A Daydream*, which was about an average citizen who suddenly broke under the pressures of modern-day society, became violent, and began killing people thoughtlessly. It literally scared the critics, but the public loved it and it was quickly climbing to the top.

A small group of Australian tourists exited Studio C, following an official ButtarsVision tour guide. Jared paused at the door of Studio D to watch the goings-on in the hallway. His fascination with his lifelong accomplishment never ended. The intercom announced that section Three-B would be closed for the remainder of the day, because filming had started. A tall man carrying a bouquet of flowers walked from one entry way to stop and ask the secretaries for directions.

Jared reminded himself that this was a closed section of his studio complex, and that this was one of the quietest buildings. He smiled and pushed his way through the large door.

Studio “D” was busy with activity as the 35-year old director entered. Heavy machinery moved parts of sets, while hydraulic systems controlled massive models of creatures for the movie. The studio itself was immense, encompassing enough space . This main area was where most of the preparations and construction took place. Jared walked over to a crew that was working on the mechanics of a huge flying dragon, called a wyvern. It was part of his new movie, *Mystic Park*, which was about how people discovered a technology that allowed them to create animals that had only previously existed in mythology and the imagination. One of the crew was a tall, but muscular guy that looked as if he was quite happy about the project.

“Hello, Mr. Buttars,” he said, checking a clipboard full of documents.

“How’s the system running now, on this guy?” he asked.

“Well, I just got the bugs worked out of the neck joints. It doesn’t just sit there and vibrate anymore.”

“Good work, Kyle. Keep it up and we’ll have this thing looking great!” Jared was pleased.

“Check it out,” Mr. Harrison said, pressing a button on a control panel. The dragon’s head bent down low, the neck moving as though it were real muscles. It looked very realistic and powerful, even if the final touches of flesh and color hadn’t been added yet.

“Very good. I’ll get back to you later.”

Jared walked on as the sounds of chains and pressurized rams operated. The entire studio was busy with activity as hundreds of people, most gathered around a certain project in groups of ten and twenty, talked and helped build the many different props. As he looked around, he saw a crew working on the very beginning of a huge serpent. Back in the corner, able to see only the top of it, there stood a huge sphinx, where technicians were painting the face and body with utmost care.

As he made his way across the studio to the quieter modeling studio, he suddenly had a thought, about a day that happened ten years ago...

It has just turned 2001, and his life had abruptly taken a step towards a monopoly on the movie market. Jamie had just dropped by, asking for a donation of money, which he had promptly refused, and he had gotten rid of an annoying wanna-be script writer. It was business as usual. He was just finishing up some final things before going home from the BV studios, sitting quietly in his office drinking some chocolate milk. Everyone insisted that he tried iced tea or coffee, but he said it deteriorated the brain's imagination. Productions were 90% imagination, he said, and 100% equipment. It was one of his old sayings.

"Mr. Buttars," came the intercom on his desk.

"Yes, Miss Williams?"

"You have a vidcall on line 74."

"Thank you, Alisha."

Jared activated the videophone and pressed a button. "Buttars here. Greetings. What's your chat?"

"Hi there! Know who this is?" the caller had the black-mode engaged.

"Sure!" Jared said, sitting up, excited because he recognized the voice.

"It's old Pat!"

"Hey! You fool! I thought you had forgotten about that by now," the black screen dissolved to show Jared's longtime friend.

"I don't forget. So what are you doing these days?"

"Just messing around as usual."

"Where you calling from? You still live in Oregon?"

"Callin' from Portland here, just got through with the Pacific Northwest Raptor Rehabilitation Division. It was a long meeting. Anyway, yeah, I still live here by Astoria," Jared looked around his hotel room, then back to the videophone.

"Neat. So you are still messing around with those damn birds, huh?"

"Never stops, Jared. I just got an award for my efforts in the field. I'm now an official representative of the Northwest Veterinary Association of Ornithology," he held up a plaque.

"Hmm. Interesting title. So how did you find my number?"

"Well, it's not like it's that hard. I just looked up on a passing blimp. You're the biggest movie producer in the world. Even Hollywood looks like a flea compared to you."

"Oh, yeah, I guess I forgot. I get pretty busy."

"So what's your next production?"

"You'll have to wait until it comes out!"

"Damn you! You should at least tell your friend."

"Nah. I like to make people suffer."

"Right," Jared said sarcastically, "You never were very sadistic."

"I know. So when are you coming out to visit us? I'll have to show you around the complex. It's changed a lot since you were last out."

"Sounds like you're running a terrific operation there. So I guess you finally achieved your dream, right?"

"No, well, I guess. I still haven't made a complete 4D movie; but I'm working on it."

"Oh. Well, I meant by becoming a director."

"Yeah, that's true. So have you heard about your old town?"

"Newton?"

"Yeah. It's getting bigger now."

"Really? What's it like now?"

"Well, they finally got another police department. I tell you, I haven't seen so much crime in a city that small."

"Pretty bad, huh? So is there still a Radio Shack in that mall?"

"Yep. Finally got a StereoVision Teleaudio Terminal system in. It's about time, I mean, they've only been out for a couple years now."

"Well, they have always been slow. Hey, is Jamie still... Hmm. What the heck is he doing nowadays?"

"Oh hell," Jared set a foot up on his desk, "he's the same as always. His house is communications central of Logatropolis."

"Hasn't it always been?"

"Yeah. But I understand he's gotten a promotion with the LPD, so maybe he'll spend more time with that."

"Oh man..." Jared sighed on the other end of the line.

The line was then silent for a short while, the two friends thinking about past times. The computers detected the silence and a voice came on while a small logo lit up in the top left corner of the screen. "Thank you for using AT&T Video Service. Four minutes used."

"So are you getting really busy with birds, or what?" Jared sighed and lowered his foot from the desk.

"Doesn't seem like it anymore. There's just not that many left. I mean, human population is exploding!"

“Yeah. Too fast for me. But hey, I got my life all going okay.”

“That’s good,” Jared Yelton said, not sounding very happy.

“What’s your problem?”

“You know what my problem is, Buttars.”

“Oh my hell,” Jared leaned over his desk, picking up a pencil, “You just don’t know when to give up, do you?”

“Nope,” then, after a pause, “I just sold a collection over to Impact the other day.”

“Hey, that’s great! Where did you have to go this time?”

“Oh, clear down into Nevada and such. It’s getting harder all the time.”

“Hmm. So what else are you doing?”

“Not much. Just writing, pictures, and birds. Same old stuff.”

“Well, that’s pretty good,” Jared said, going over some EMail that had been left for him that day. One came up that he seen yet. “Oh, hey, I gotta go,” he said, looking at who it was from—one of his main actors. He had a quick financial call to make and then head home to his family. “I have some last minute stuff to do.”

“Yeah, me too,” Yelton said, looking at an old map.

“Well, good to talk to you again.”

“You bet. I’ll have to come out sometime. See you later.”

“Be well,” Jared turned off the videophone and tossed the pencil in the air a few times with a free hand. He sighed, leaning back in his plush leather chair. He had endured high school with these friends; now he watched them as they went their separate directions, and in a way it made him sad. They just didn’t have the time to get together anymore. But they needed to have a reunion sometime. It had been three years since either of them had visited.

He pressed some more buttons on the videophone, finished his business, and left his office. The lights clicked off as he shut the door, turning to greet the soft sounds of the hall.

When he arrived back home, on the hill above town, he pulled into his 6-car garage and greeted his children as they came up to the door.

“Hi there, Steve,” he said to his six year old son. “Hello Tyler,” his five year old; “Hey, Daddy’s home Jenny, Synthia, Monica!” he greeted his two and three year old daughters. His wife came carrying their

smallest. He kissed her. "How's little Greg doing?" he asked about the little nine-month old.

"Oh, he's just fine," Jenny said.

"Great! I love you, honey..."

Jared would always remember that day. He had not seen nor heard from Jared or Jamie ever since—and that was almost ten years ago. He had no idea where either one was. Jamie somehow managed to stay out of contact and Logatropolis was just too big to try and find him. He wasn't sure what had happened to Jared, other than the report he had seen on Unsolved Mysteries. He had just suddenly disappeared...

"Damn it," he swore, regretting never having scheduled a get-together.

"Problem, Mr. Buttars, sir?"

"Huh? Oh, no, what can I do for you?" It was his younger brother, James, who worked there as a set designer.

"I need to have you sign this."

"What is it?"

"It's a purchase order so we can get the C4 charges for the segment we're shooting this weekend."

"Oh. Okay," Jared took a pen from his pocket and signed by the small 'X'.

"Thanks, Bro."

"Yep. Don't let me catch you playing on that virtual reality computer, though! You do that on your lunch-break!"

"Sure thing, Boss."

Chapter 2

Wild Rain

The mud flew far as the battered old Chevy made its way up the mountain road. The mountains were drenched in mud from the recent rain, and the roads were hard to navigate. A skinny man wearing an old red sweater sat in the driver's side, fighting the stick-shift, and stomping on the accelerator. He spun the steering wheel violently as the truck tried to slide off the road.

On the passenger side sat a white-haired man with glasses. He remained quiet, although he was getting bounced around like a kangaroo. He smacked his old lips and stared through the windshield as the rain washed the mud off.

As the wipers made their rhythmic noise against the grimy window, the truck's heater blew, and the driver cursed the road.

"Damn rain! Why can't they control the weather by now?! You'd think they could figure out a way to control all that stuff by now!" The steering wheel wrenched to the right, and he fought to hold it as the engine whined. He shifted to first gear, and floored the gas pedal again. The truck lunged forward, hit a rock, and proceeded slowly up the road.

Between the two people sat a collection of handheld radios. Speaker-microphone cords tangled, they bumped together and some were dangerously close to the edge of the seat.

"Q7JL, Q7JL, QB7OGM!" blared one of the radios.

The old man picked up the mike to the radio on the dash and responded to the call.

A straight piece of road developed, so Jamie shifted up to second while Bob Lloyd talked to the HAM Elder. In the back of the pickup, under a green tarp, were some parts to a repeater. Soon Jamie would be atop the mountain, ready to add some features to his 2.4 GHz repeater. Pausing for a moment, he real-

ized with a tingle in his bones that this was his 42nd repeater system.

He recalled the moment that each and every one went on the air. Beginning with his first; the glorious 449.850 MHz system he started when he was a teenager. Those were the days when voice technology was just becoming standard and artificial intelligence had only begun to seep into the world of communications. He smiled, remembering the way huge heat sinks were needed to cool the components and how bulky everything seemed. It was quite different compared to liquid nitrogen injectors and subminiature fiber optic Tenna connections. But the end result was still his familiar friend, the traditional radio wave. That was what HAM operators had kept alive from its very discovery.

A small flock of songbirds flew low across the murky road, seeming slow and weak in the rain. Jamie thought of his old bird-freak friend, Jared, and wondered where he was now. He'd heard rumors that he'd mysteriously disappeared, and others that he had went bankrupt and simply hadn't been heard from since. Jamie somehow felt that there was a lot more to it. He'd stop by ButtarsVision and ask sometime. If anything, they knew more than anyone.

He looked at one of the radios to see the time, and realized he'd better hurry, lest his wife, Jasmine, get angry with him again.

With the noise of the rain, the wipers, the heater, the engine, and the radio conversation, Jamie fell silent and forged onward, fighting the old '92 Chevy.

Soon the rain fell harder and the mud began to build up. He honked the truck's horn at a mud-hole. "Damn!" He swore as the truck sunk into the mud. The tires spun helplessly even with the gas completely flooded. The truck merely rocked back and forth.

"We're hung up!" Bob told him.

"No we're not!" Jamie yelled.

"Well, then we're stuck!" Bob said quietly.

"NO WE'RE NOT!" Jamie yelled, shifting again to first gear with a violent jerk of the lever.

The truck's engine began to heat up, and oil began to leak out of the bottom. The gauges went crazy, but Jamie didn't notice. He continued to floor the pedal, not caring whether there was traction or not. Soon, the engine sputtered and died. Bob stared silently at Jamie, who was suddenly quiet.

"Told you," Bob finally said.

"Ahhh!" Jamie exclaimed, and swung a menacing fist at Bob's stomach.

Bob ducked, and got clobbered in the top of his head.

"Owww!" Jamie screamed, his hand hurting.

Bob said nothing.

"Now what are we gonna do?" Jamie asked while the rain continued to pour down.

"I suspect it was not wise to venture up on this day."

"Ahh, be quiet, no one asked you!"

"But you asked..."

"Shut up!"

Bob fell silent.

Jamie rubbed his red face, quiet for a few moments, thinking about the situation.

"N7XLH, N7XLH, QC7O!" came a blast from one of the radios.

"Ahh heck," Jamie picked up a microphone, making one of the handhelds fall to the floor.

"N7XLH here, go ahead Clifton."

The digitally enhanced voice of Clifton came clearly over the radio: "Good afternoon Jamie. I was curious as to whether you still planned to make it up to the repeater site today."

"Oh, ah, Clifton. Sure, I, uh, was just, uh, making my way up it now. It's a little rainy, but, ah, we're doing pretty good."

"Oooh. Fine. I just thought that perhaps you would want to wait until after the rain, but I guess since you are already making progress then very well."

"Yeah, sure, uh, Clifton. We're doing great. No problem at all. And, uh, thanks for the call."

"Very fine. Q7CO clear."

"N7XLH out."

Bob looked mortified at Jamie.

“What?” he asked, intimidated.

“We can’t go anywhere but you told him that we were just fine?!”

“We aren’t bleeding yet, are we?”

Bob didn’t reply.

Jamie continued, “Besides, he’s just an old electronically preserved man! He’s 120 years old! He can’t help anyway.”

“He could have called someone.”

Jamie glared back at him until he looked away. A few minutes went by.

Bob twisted the dial on top of his radio. “Who am I?” he suddenly asked.

“Oh hell. Are you serious?” Jamie asked, wondering if he was joking, or if it was really another attack of Lloyd’s syndrome.

“Who are you?!” Bob asked, looking over and seeming startled.

“Damn,” Jamie cursed, realizing that Bob wasn’t kidding.

“Hello, Damn. Who am I?”

“I’m not Damn!” Jamie began to get mad. “You are Bob Lloyd, Q7JL, and I am Jamie Forbush, N7XLH.”

“Oh. What am I?”

“Brain dead, that’s what.”

Bob didn’t say anything.

Jamie tried to start the truck again, but nothing happened when he turned the key. For now, they were staying put.

Bob sat like a small child, quiet and scared. Jamie swore under his breath, trying every lever and button he could find. Outside, the truck didn’t move. It remained stuck in the downpour. A miniature mud-slide developed and coursed down the road, flowing between the tires of the truck.

“Ahhh!” Jamie screamed, pounding the steering wheel, “I’ll sue them! . . . Who are they, anyway?!” he leaned forward and peered at the company logo on the dashboard. His eyebrows raised with discovery, “Chevrolet?!” he screamed. “I’ll call them up right now!” He reached for the microphone to the dash radio.

“N7XLH for the patch!” he practically yelled into the mike. He waited, then accessed the patch. A dial tone came back. Without thinking about what number to dial, he punched 9-1-1. There was a couple of rings then an operator picked it up.

“Nine-one-one emergency,” she said.

“Yes, this is Jamie Forbush up on Mount Steven near Logatropolis-East. I’m up about half way and I’m stuck.” Then he added, louder, “I’m in a Chevy!”

“Yes, Sir. I understand that you are unable to move, correct?”

“That’s right! And what’s more, it’s a Chevy!”

“Okay. Is anyone hurt?”

“Nope, but the truck is dead. I can’t even see the tires for all the mud. And did you hear me? It’s a Chevy!”

“All right, Sir. I’ll see if I can’t get someone to help you out.”

“That would be great. It’s raining cats and birds out here, and it’s getting cold. Anyway, it all happened ‘cause of this damn Chevy!”

“Sir?” the operator asked, “You are on the normal trail aren’t you?”

“Yep.”

“Very good, Sir. No medical assistance needed. Some help will be on the way.”

“Did you hear me about the Chevy? ...”

But he was no longer connected to 911. The repeater began to give its morse code ID as Jamie continued talking, unknowing that they had hung up. “...I’m going to sue them when I get out of here!”

Bob put a hand on his arm, “Jamie, they’re gone,” he said soothingly, as if someone had just died.

Jamie shoved his hand aside, “I know that, you dolt!”

Bob looked away again, and decided to leave Jamie alone.

Jamie announced himself as clear on the repeater and put the radio microphone back on its hook. He took a deep breath, leaned back, and sighed loudly. He closed his eyes and tried to concentrate for a while. He needed some rest after so much activity.

The rain beat down heavily on the hood, and the truck seat creaked as they settled down and waited. Tired from arguing, Jamie soon fell asleep, his head nodded off to the side. He dreamed of being a radio wave. At one point, he flitted across repeaters and mountain tops, being attracted by antennas and shot back out again by high power transistors. He could feel the vibrations of modulation on his back as he carried someone's voice to another radio. His amplitude was amazing: He felt like he had so much power. And his speed was amazing. He soared towards a mountain range, a particular peak coming into view. A tower hailed him with its glistening steel columns. He gleefully sped towards it and submerged himself within the antenna atop it. He coursed through the warm copper, feeling the resistance of the beautiful metal. He felt the cool gold metal of an old friend, an "N-connector," and realized with a start that it was dangling loose in the building. No radio was connected! His energy began to diminish. He scattered within the building and began to panic. Soon his energy would altogether disappear and he would no longer exist! There had to be a radio here somewhere!

Suddenly, he awoke, startled with a realization.

"We'll have to carry the repeater the rest of the way up!" he yelled. "It's not far from here!" He glanced across the seat. The passenger door was cracked open, and Bob was gone.

"Bob?" he asked, quietly.

Faint voices from the radios melted together into an indecipherable mumble, forming an eerie reply.

"Bob?" he called again, slightly louder. Upon hearing no reply, he wailed, "BOB!" in a fright-stricken voice. But Bob did not return nor reply.

Jamie reached down and grabbed a raincoat. He opened his door and stepped outside in search of Bob. His feet sank into the mud while the fading rain pelted him on the head. The rain now fell lightly, but was very thick and wet; the mud remained.

He wiped water from his eyes and slogged along the road, ever upward, looking for his poor, deranged friend. He stopped and called for him occasionally, listening for an answer, but he heard nothing, for the rain muffled everything.

Most likely, Bob still didn't know who he was, and therefore could not be found by calling his name. Jamie would have to track him down. He swore again, his vocabulary finally coming to good use. For all he knew, Bob probably thought he was a deer, and he was foraging on the leaves and grass of the surrounding forest.

"Oh, hell," Jamie said, rolling his eyes, and sloshed off, beginning to feel more and more discouraged.

Chapter 3

Memory

Some eighty miles away, just touching into the southeast corner of Oregon, where the desert was unoccupied and dry, the dust rose in small clouds, and the sun shone hotly. From atop the buttes and plateaus, the silence was immense. Ragged sagebrush and cacti grew scattered among the golden red dirt and sand. Small rodents scurried across the landscape.

Jared surveyed the landscape with scrutiny, admiring the subtle hills and jagged cracks that coursed through the dirt. Faint shadows of gnarled trees were cast upon the ground, lacking any sort of pattern.

It was peaceful and quiet, the nearest sign of ‘civilization’ was very far away. The sounds of magpies, crows, and other birds cut through the silence on occasion. Distant and untouchable, there were Hawks soaring above the earth, searching the desert for food, or merely flying to escape the heat.

He checked his memory once again, remembering the location of the familiar canyon to the north. He’d been out in the desert for six years, and well knew the land and the life. He was used to the heat. The desert was a perfect home for him, having a good resource of food, tall cliffs, and no human inhabitants.

A slight breeze blew up, swirling the golden dust in faint patterns, and making the feathers on his back flutter and shift.

He perched atop a broken, dry tree. Standing quietly on one leg, as Hawks often do, he thought about some haunting dreams he’d been having. He already had enjoyed a sufficient meal for the day, allowing time to ponder.

Images of humans and birds mixed thoroughly in his head. At times they seemed one in the same. He could not fathom how that could be, yet his dreams twisted reality beyond recognition. Occasionally he saw distinct human faces, or various strange things

from human civilization. He couldn't remember what they were, but felt sure about their origins. Two faces kept reappearing in his mind and something was strangely familiar about them.

Only now, these past few suns, did he seem to be having recurring visions and nightmares about it. He resolved to ignore it and hope in earnest that it would soon pass.

The air remained hot, for in the desert the heat continued until sunset itself. He watched with mild interest the occasional passing creatures, and the elongating shadows. However, his quiet moment of rest was over, for there were mouths to feed back at his nest.

Thus, he took off in a graceful unfurling of wings, facing the steady wind, letting it carry him high. It was time to find food for his young; they still relied on their parents for survival. Soon, however, they would begin learning to fly, then to hunt—that day, indeed, would be joyous.

There was a ridge of small mountains that bordered the open desert plains, and he liked those best for soaring long hours in search of prey. The subtle winds always seemed to provide perfect updrafts of warm air that stretched for miles, allowing him to almost effortlessly glide while searching the ground for movement.

On experienced wings, he flew along the ridge and gained altitude. Today the warm updrafts were excellent, and within a short time he was but a mere speck to the ground observer.

The sun shone brightly in the cloudless sky, and the heat he had felt earlier seemed to disappear as he cut through the higher, cooler air. Every detail of life on the ground was clear to him, his keen Hawk vision unerring.

Finding prey on the wing was somewhat difficult, as opposed to waiting patiently on a secluded perch. Although rodents and their cousins rarely search the sky, they are aware of Hawklike shadows passing over or near them. For that reason, he was concentrating most in the direction away from his shadow. Some days, like this one, when the sky was fiery and cloudless, the shadow below was easily dark enough to alert any potential prey.

Far distant, in the eastern valley over the ridge, he saw the familiar movement of the pikas. They were small rodent-like animals that lived in the rocky slopes of the hills. It was very difficult to capture them because they communicated with each other with shrill calls. If danger approached, they would quickly retreat into their many scattered holes. They were smarter than most little mammals.

He was still too far away for them to see him, but sooner or later they would, and vacate the area. But it was not his intent to sharpen his skills by hunting them today; it took extra energy and patience to defeat their security. Instead, he would circle about the desert and wait for something else to make a mistake—a last, fatal mistake.

Suddenly his vision blurred and he felt pain in his head. His flight suffered and he began to drop. He saw the same images of humans in his mind, two of them, walking closer to him in a dream world of nothing but fields and trees. They stepped high over the tall grasses and approached, much faster than he thought possible. He appeared to be perched on a strange tree; one of many in a long line of short, naked trees. The humans stood near him and reached out to touch his soft feathers. As he felt their alien and discomfoting touch, thoughts and memories he had never known before entered his mind. Abruptly the dream ceased and a spinning, enlarging view of desert sand came to view. His instincts gained control before his thoughts did, and he spread his wings to glide upwards in time to avoid crashing to the earth. The harrowing vision had brought its own meaning, he could feel knowledge of something intangible now . . .

Strength returned to his muscles and he rose again with the thermals. He remembered a vague relationship with the humans, something he found frightening. There were two friends he knew. Somehow, in a strange, unknown way, he felt as though he had known them all his life. The fact that they were human made him nervous and uneasy. But he felt he must somehow understand them. An undying curiosity had built within his heart.

As he continued his great circling, he remembered that his mate was also hunting. Suddenly he realized a difficult problem. How

was he going to pursue these humans with his family depending on him? He would have to venture into the human civilization. He couldn't possibly explain to them what he planned to do. They did not know of his visions. He would have to wait until fall, when his young were gone and his mate once again independent of him. During migration, he could easily be gone for a few weeks without regret.

He forced further thoughts of the sort from his mind and concentrating on his hunting. Determined, he circled for hours and saw nothing. He grew weary and changed direction for his home canyon. The sun slowly began to seek shelter in the distant horizon and light slowly ebbed away from the desert.

With darkness settling in, he landed on a large outcropping of rock and soon fell asleep, energy drained from him for the day.

That night, the visions came back once again. Much clearer now, he realized what they meant. A flood of memories came to him, and he both hated and felt fascinated to have them.

His thoughts screamed. Mixed emotions plagued him. Human beings were a part of his past. Was it possible he had been one of those appalling creatures? Could it be that he led a life submerged in the secretive past?

A curiosity built up inside him. He would travel to the human civilization. It was only to visit friends, people that knew of his dream to leave... He wondered if they knew it had come true. If not, they would definitely be surprised to learn of his new existence! Instinct caused him to shiver and pull his wings in tighter. Human! Was he out of his mind? What kind of deranged ideas were he suffering? His mind drifted back to a distant memory of a day in 2005, when he left the human world for good. At the same time, he realized he would never be the same.

“Doctor, the centrifuge is done,” said the assistant.

“Very good,” he said. He turned around from the cabinet holding a single test tube. His ID card hung loosely on the left lab-coat pocket. The status it displayed was:

Chief Engineer; Dr. J. W. Yelton DVM

“Do you want me to separate them for the night?”

“Uh, no, that’s okay Dr. Meyers. I’ll get it. You can go home.”

“All right, thanks. See you on Monday.”

“Okay,” Dr. Yelton said, sitting down in front of a microscope. He rolled the chair on its wheels with a kick until it slowed and stopped before a rack of chemicals. Dr. Meyers turned off the lights in her office and closed the door. Her steps echoed through the lab as she made her way to the main entrance.

“You have a good weekend,” he called just before she left. As the echo of the closing door faded away down the hall, the resonating sound of the centrifuge’s fan became the only other sound in the lab. Jared peered at a sheet with chemicals listed on it, then rolled his chair back to the microscope. He sat and made minute changes to the microscope’s adjustment, occasionally peering at a small notepad with vague sketches in it. After a while, he turned it off and put several chemical containers on a storage shelf.

He breathed a long sigh, then walked briskly over to the centrifuge. He opened the cylindrical door and it made a loud click in response. Compressed air hissed as pressure was released. He opened the door all the way and took out a round rack full of test tubes.

Quietly, he peered down at them. After reading several labels, he took two of the tubes out. The lights buzzing above and the echoing sounds of his footsteps made the desolate lab seem eerie as he set the tubes onto a small metal tray.

“I do believe they will find this useful,” he said to himself as he set a plastic sheet down on the counter top. He began marking small details on it, peering at the test tube labels. “Finally!” he remarked, putting the sheet into a hanger. “A cure for broken wings! My last gift to veterinary medicine!”

He pulled a stool over and sat on it as he systematically removed the remaining tubes from the centrifuge. He put all of them into a rack, and closed the centrifuge, turning it off. The lab seemed impossibly quiet as he carried the rack to a refrigerator, echoes confronting from every corner.

He smiled a bit, closing the refrigerator door. Leaning back on it, he sighed again. Without warning, a single tear rolled down his cheek.

“Well,” he said to himself, voice about to crack, “it’s time to go.” He paused, stepping forward. “After all these years...”

He walked into his office and turned on the light. Moving slowly, he removed his ID card and gazed at it with satisfaction. Then, like a dark shadow, he set it on his desk, centered in the clear space in front of the chair.

He pulled a set of keys from his pocket and walked over to a picture hanging on the wall. It was his favorite one, that he had owned ever since he was fifteen. It still remained an important symbol of his work. It was a single Red-Tailed Hawk perched contentedly on a piece of desert wood. He stared at it for a while, then swung it out on hidden hinges.

Behind it was a wall safe, to which he turned the combination carefully. Making almost no sound, he inserted a small key into the lock, and pulled it open. Inside were but two things. A small test tube capped with a wax seal; and a feather sitting on the second shelf. The tube sat at an angle on a padded red holder.

His eyes watered as he reached up for it. "My never-used friend," he said quietly. Leaving the safe open, he carried the small tube to his desk, pulled out the chair, and sat down. He stared at the tube for a long time. The drone of the fluorescent lights seemed to grow louder. He simply turned it over and over in his hands, not quite looking at it, but past it.

Then he set it down, and opened a desk drawer. Reaching far into the back, he found a small velvet case. This he pulled out and set next to the small tube. Then he closed the drawer with a quiet click. He opened the case and picked up a small glass syringe. A gold needle sat in an indentation in the velvet case. Carefully, he picked it up and with a small clinking sound, screwed it onto the end of the syringe. This he held for a long time, almost as if he didn't know quite what to do with it.

Then, slowly and meticulously, he pushed the needle through the wax seal of the tube. He depressed the syringe, making a small trail of bubbles within the tube, then pulled it back, drawing the translucent-red liquid into the cylinder. The small tube was quickly emptied, as it contained no more than two CCs. He set the tube back onto the desk with a slight motion and stood up, holding the syringe carefully with both hands.

Half smiling, but emotionless, he walked around his desk, looking at his bookshelves and awards. The pictures of his old friends, his trusted staff, birds, and the many helpful people that had meant a lot to him in his progress. All of it seemed to surround him in his office, a small place that held such a large collection of time's gifts.

His work here had been done. His revolutionary treatments for birds; his Nobel prize for environmental changes; and his significant achievement of repopulating the golden eagle across the continent. All of it was his pride and bliss. Now, his final offering, the cure for wings, had been perfected. His staff would know its purpose. Now he could leave. In peace, he would finally go to his true happiness.

The needle did not sting as he pierced the vein in his arm. Soon, he felt the effects of the fluid, and he dropped down on his knees; then laid down, contentedly to rest.¹

¹ From **He That Hath Wings**; Edmund Hamilton ©1938 by Popular Fiction Company; copyright renewed by Edmond Hamilton.

Chapter 4

Question

Jared entered the modeling studio and breathed the sweet smell of clay and paint as only a motion picture facility could produce. There were relatively few people around, and the studio was quiet. Models of all types of fantasy creatures stood on counter-tops or hung from wire frames. The paneled walls were covered with shelves that were full of small, lifelike sculptures from previous productions. Staring glass eyes gazed from all directions, giving him a spooky feeling.

A technician sat at a desk intently adding details to a figure, looking through a lighted magnifying lamp. She looked up from her quiet work. “Hello, Mr. Buttars.”

“Hello, Estee. When will that one be finished?” he asked out of curiosity.

“Probably by tomorrow,” she said, “Just finishing the scales on the back here.”

“Very good. So have you heard from your brother?”

“Not for a few years. I don’t know where he went.”

“Hmm. I just now was wondering where he had gone. Humph,” he sighed, “Used to be one of my best friends. Don’t know where we changed direction. I just wonder if I’ll ever see him again.”

“Hey,” Estee said, “I wouldn’t worry about it too much. He was too bossy anyway. You’re probably better off not knowing where he is.”

Jared laughed, but it wasn’t with spirit. He was beginning to miss his friends. After many years of living without them around, he realized that they were important to him. He wondered if they were in contact with each other.

“Well, good work, Estee. See you later,” he said, gesturing to the dragon figure. She nodded as he walked past her, walking through an open door into a small hallway bordered by offices. He walked into one of them, the small, windowless room comfortably warm to him. The office itself belonged to nobody, but served as a space to work on whatever business the current production required.

Jared sat down on a rolling chair and flipped through a stack of writus. They were assortments of parts-lists and quotes on various items he had considered purchasing for *Mystic Park*. He had been over them all before, and now they bored him. Nevertheless, he had successfully acquired everything he needed, and at a reasonable expense. What he was looking forward to, however, was taking a few of his near-life-size creations out to shoot a scene in the mountains. It would add to the realism tremendously. The ones that were finished had purposely been scheduled that way so they could be used for the first session.

He reached across his desk and entered a number into a keypad. Soon, his secretary’s voice flooded the room.

“Yes, Mr. Buttars?”

“Uh, yes, Miss Williams, has the Mt. Steven forest service cleared us officially for tomorrow?”

“Let me check.” There was the sound of typing on a computer. “Yes, they called last night. Sorry you weren’t notified, but Monica was substituting for me.”

“Of course. No problem. They do understand that we will be there for a week, right?”

“Uh-huh. It says from September twelfth to the eighteenth.”

Jared checked his calendar. It was the eleventh. Good, so he *was* on track. Often he forgot and fell behind; because there was just so much to do. “Okay, thank you.”

“Anything else?”

“Mm. Just call them for verification before you leave. I need to be sure that no hikers or campers suddenly appear while we’re filming.”

“Okay.”

“Be well.”

The connection clicked off while he reorganized some of the piles of writus. He pulled out a notebook and jotted a few notes. Then he kicked back and relaxed for a while. It was nice to wind down at the end of a busy day. Tomorrow the entire crew would be on location, and, as usual, he would be busy trying to keep everything running smoothly. He would be nervous and excited, but that was part of the thrill of making movies that brought him here in the first place. He sighed and let his thoughts drift...

...back to his friends. Where were they? What were they doing? He began to seriously consider answering those questions right now. How could he go about finding where they were? He didn't even know where to start.

Perhaps he could find Jamie first. For one thing, Jared was going to be really hard to find out about, considering that there had been a television report on him about how he had been found missing from his lab one Friday afternoon...

He looked around the office for anything helpful, but found nothing in particular very interest-provoking.

Hmmm. He thought. *Radios. Jamie would have to be around radios...* He tapped the keypad once again and called upon his secretary.

"Yes?"

"Could you do me a quick favor?"

"Of course."

"I need a listing of all HAM Radio agencies, clubs, or whatever you can find in this valley — better make that the whole state."

She sounded slightly confused, "HAM Radio? Do you mind if I ask why?"

"No, I am just looking up something. . . someone."

"Okay. I'll try to have that for you within a couple of minutes, Sir."

"No, better be within a few seconds. Go ahead and use my TVM terminal."

"Oh, thank you, Sir."

"Thank you. Ring me at this office when you have it."

"Okay."

"Be well."

He slid his chair back and wondered: Would Jamie still be in HAM Radio? The last time he had talked with him had been ten years ago... That was also the last time he had talked to Jared. Interesting. Did Jamie finally find some useful occupation, or was he running some international radio club by now? What if he knew where Jared Yelton was? Maybe he was an undercover police officer and therefore wasn't supposed to be easy to find. Maybe he worked for a radio company. Jared hadn't paid any attention to the radio world, so he had no idea. For the most part, radio had become somewhat obsolete over the last few years. The only remaining need of radio was for short distance communications and nostalgic antique hobbies. Newer, faster, TennaWave was much more efficient; especially for full surround sound and efficient energy transfer. Ah well, Jared couldn't help but laugh. Imagine, Jamie still into regular old radio! It couldn't possibly be true. Jamie was one to follow along with technology, not stay behind with the outdated stuff. Surely he was at least working with TennaWave by now... But perhaps he had followed another dream of his, and was serving the interests of the law. Jared imagined him in a shiny new Ford Knight, chasing criminals at speeds of over 300 MPH. He laughed, imagining him writing a ticket. He couldn't help it, but for some reason Jamie just didn't fit the description.

The intercom beeped then, and Jared picked it up, hoping to hear that he had been located right away.

"Buttars. Greetings," he answered.

"Yes, I have a list of HAM Radio clubs throughout the entire nation with me."

"Wow!" Jared exclaimed. "How did you do that?"

"Well, this list is pretty small. It's half a page."

Immediately Jared's hopes fell. How would he ever find him now? "Half a page? Are you sure it's HAM Radio?"

"Quite sure. There are only six listings. Should I DiffuScan it to you?"

"Uh, yes, thanks."

"Okay, I'll send it in."

"Be well."

Jared rubbed his chin thoughtfully, wondering if he was following the wrong trail. A small slot in the wall began to make a slight whirring noise, and abruptly a writus shot out of it, stopping just short of ejecting to the floor. A short tone beeped, and Jared removed the writus from a slot near the door.

The list was indeed brief:

Listing of HAM Radio Organizations, by member quantity

Eastern Tennessee Country Guild HAM Radio Society

Members: 430; Repeaters: 12

Southern Nevada Iguana's Rock HAM Radio Organization

Members: 220; Repeaters: 8

Boise HAM Radio Club

Members: 173; Repeaters: 3

Milwaukee, WI HAM Radio Enthusiast's Club

Members: 131; Repeaters: 2

New York HAM Radio Population

Members: 122; Repeaters: 1

Logatropolis Utah HAM World, Inc.

Members: 5; Repeaters: 41

He could scarcely believe it; the list was indeed small. He glanced over it, knowing it was impossible for Jamie to be listed. He set it on his desk, turning his thoughts to other methods of finding him.

The police network was large and strong. Certainly if he checked with them, they would have a listing for him. With luck, he wouldn't be a secret agent or anything. He started to reach for the keypad once again—then he remembered something.

Jared picked the list up and read it over again, carefully. There on the bottom was Logatropolis. That *had* to be it. Where else could Jamie be? Jared circled it with a pen, and rolled the chair in front of a computer. He tapped the screen and it came on with a friendly voice greeting.

Navigating with the on-screen buttons, he quickly got into the ButtarsVision Network phone directory. He entered 'HAM World, Inc.' and waited for the entry to come up. The fields came up blank. HAM World, Inc. did exist, but there was no

address or phone number. Jared was smart, though. He cross-referenced it with Jamie's name. On either entry alone, the entries came up blank. But if the program had two to work with, then the satellite system could search by location, and update the files with a new address and number. He entered both names in for a full scale search. A voice told him to wait a moment.

Soon the computer informed him that the database was being updated. *Yes!* Jared thought. His double request caused the system find a hole, so the program activated the satellite system to scan for a resemblance. He waited a minute more, then a new listing came up.

BRIEF LISTING (*new DB entry*)

NAME: Jamie G. Forbush

ADDRESS: Quadrant 454; Residence 661-0

COMMUNITY: Logatropolis

STATE: Utah

LINK: None Found

OTHER: "HAM World, INC." is same

"Well, how about that," Jared mused to himself. "Print and exit!" he said to the computer. *At last! An address!* Jared was pleased; Jamie was still around! Why hadn't he done that a long time ago?

He got up. As he left the office he grabbed the printout from the writus slot. He tucked it into a pocket and proceeded down the small hallway again.

"Mr. Buttars, Sir?"

Jared turned to see who it was. Following him was one of the technicians on his video team.

"Uh, yes?" he asked.

"Are you still planning on using the neotubes for tomorrow's scene?"

"As a matter of fact, no. The weather is supposed to be very sunny, so we'll have to take the mist units, and probably some cauldron fans."

"Ok," said the technician, marking a sheet. "Anything else?"

Jared thought for a second. "Don't need to worry much because it'll be fairly cold up there, which will help when we shoot

the gryphon scene. It's pretty dense forest. We shouldn't have a problem."

"All right. Very well then, I'll update my department on this stuff."

"Ok. Remember, there will be a meeting tomorrow morning at seven, just before we leave, so if anything changes, you'll find out."

"Okay. Have a good day, Mr. Buttars."

"Be well," he said. The technician turned and went busily down the hall, while Jared continued back through the modeling studio. He had some serious work to do.

Eventually, he got back to his main office, where he checked for interesting mail or messages. There were none.

"Miss Williams?" he spoke into the intercom.

"She is out at the moment, Mr. Buttars, this is Mrs. Jones."

"Ah, yes. I am going to leave for a couple of hours, I need to make sure I have no pressing appointments."

"Let me check," there were typing sounds. "Uh, there is one last item for now."

"And what would that be?"

"Interview with a William Breaker, Jr., he is applying for a position on the advertising team."

"Hmm," Jared pondered. Where had he heard that name before? "Okay, when is that?"

"Actually, he's here now, Sir."

"Ah, very well. Send him in."

The intercom clicked off. Very soon, the secretary opened one of the double doors to his office.

"Mr. Breaker, Jr.; Mr. Buttars, Sir."

Jared motioned with a hand as a brown-haired young man entered with caution.

"Please have a seat," Jared said.

Will took a seat and leaned forward to shake Jared's hand. Jared made no motion in response.

"Ah, I avoid the minor protocols of initial friendly engagement until I have properly established an opinion on your academic and imaginative aptitudes, so please, let us start by determining

some of your background characteristics,” he explained as he sat down at his long oak desk.

Will seemed a little uncomfortable. Jared had activated his rock-hard personality. It was to establish who was in control from the very beginning, as well as to weed out those who weren't completely confident.

“Uh, yes,” Will said, slumping back in his chair. “I, uh, was originally from this area, but my family moved to Iowa when I was four. But now I am back. I have been in advertising classes and workgroups before. I really enjoy all areas of advertising.”

Jared nodded, impressed that Will was able to regain his stamina so quickly.

“So what brought you to my company, Will?” he asked, carefully picking up a pen from a holder.

“Well, I came back to the area a couple of years ago with a group I worked for in Iowa, but recently I've found that they aren't doing as well. With the opening for a similar job here, I took the first chance I saw to apply for it. I was also hoping I would be lucky enough to be considered by you, because you are, after all, the largest motion picture maker in the world.”

“Yes,” Jared agreed. He looked at his computer screen. It now had a listing of Will's credentials. “Hmm,” Jared began, “it seems as though you have all the necessary qualifications. I believe you are the first person who has the necessary qualifications and met the requirements of ButtarsVision personnel. You're hired.”

Will could hardly believe his ears. “You mean it?” he asked.

“Nothing less,” Jared said. “Of course, you will be on a three-month period of examination, in which time you will be evaluated for permanent employment. In the meantime, welcome to the staff” he smiled and extended a hand.

Will jumped up and shook it with vigor. “Why, I certainly appreciate this, Mr. Buttars. When do I start?”

“Why, right now, of course. Allow me to show you to your office.”

Will picked up a small briefcase that he had been carrying. “Thank you, Mr. Buttars.”

“No problem.”

Jared pressed a button on his desk, and one of the doors opened. He began walking and Will followed.

“I am especially in need of someone who can come up with interesting slogans or advertising campaigns that aren’t annoying or cute. I want my ads to be impressive and strong, just like the movies they are representing.”

“Yes, of course, Mr. Buttars,” Will said, stepping close behind, down one of the main corridors.

“I’m sure you will find some other talented people in our advertising division. They have a combined total of over three hundred fifty years’ experience.”

“I am sure of that, Sir. I hope I am able to serve you well with them.”

Jared turned and stopped before a metal door. He pressed a green button, and faced Will.

“I think you will have a good experience. We generally try to make work here like a pleasurable hobby. For many it is.”

“Glad to hear that, sir.”

“Oh,” Jared said, almost absentmindedly, “Why don’t you take off your coat, it’s fairly warm in these halls.”

“Oh, thank you, Mr. Buttars,” Will pulled his coat off and draped it over his case.

The door opened and a monorail train waited just outside. Will seemed impressed. “An entire train system?”

“Yes, the advertising division is in another building entirely. Really, it’s the best way to get from one end of this complex to the other.”

“Very nice,” Will said, bending down to pick up his case. He looked up to find Jared staring intently at him.

“Yes?” he asked, confused.

“What is that?” Jared asked pointing to his shirt.

Will looked down. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“That! A sports promotion!”

Will noticed the logos and designs of the Iowa football team on his shirt.

“Why, yes, so it is,” he said, thinking that Jared must have been a fan as well. “You like the Iowa Grunts, too?”

“I will have none of it! Surely you must have read the sign on the door you came in!”

“Uh,” Will thought back, “No, I saw no sign. Is there a problem?”

“You bet your butt there’s a problem,” Jared said, the monorail waiting. He pressed a red button and the door closed. Jared began walking back the way he had come.

“Ah, Mr. Buttars, Sir?” Will asked, following, “I can fix whatever problem there might be...”

Jared cut him off, “I do not tolerate sports promotions of any kind within my building—especially football! You’re fired!”

Will looked dejected.

“Get out!” Jared yelled.

Will walked past him, not wishing to argue the case further, as he was already in danger of a serious lawsuit.

Jared walked back to his office, pausing at the reception area where his secretary was. Will rushed by behind him, passing with a sudden rush of wind, heartbroken but dashing for the exit.

“Any other appointments?” Jared asked in an impatient manner.

The secretary checked the computer one more time. “No, not today, Sir.”

“Very good, I’m going to the library. If I have a call, please forward it to my TennaPhone.”

“The ButtarsVision Library?”

“No, Logatropolis Centre Library.”

“I’ll forward your calls,” she said pleasantly. “Ah, do you mind if I ask a question?”

“Not at all.”

“Did he get the job?”

“Nope. Sports promotion violation.”

“Oh, another one?”

“Yes. It’s too bad, really, that we still have slackers like that one. He had some good qualities, too.”

The secretary shook her head, “Too bad,” she said.

“Oh well. See you later,” he said.

The secretary nodded, and Jared exited through the main doors.

Chapter 5

Into the Woods

Resting by a damp tree, Jamie gasped for breath, tired of fighting the deep mud. Now, finally, the rain was beginning to abate, but the mud never seemed to go away.

“BOB!!!” he yelled, more out of anger than in search of him. Naturally, there was no response.

He was tired of associating with him. The older Bob got, the more troublesome he became. Maybe it would be better to just leave him, and go install the repeater on his own. But then again, he would need to wire it, and he needed knowledge of Algebra 2 to do that, but he had never taken that class. He needed Bob’s mathematical know-how to put the thing in.

“Damn!” he swore. He knew he should have brought someone else instead. The repeater depended on his success in finding Bob.

He started off again, trying to find the best trail to avoid the mud. Although the rain had finally stopped, the sun was going down. Within a few hours it would be dark. He clenched his teeth in anger, hoping that the idiot would show up before then; the last thing he wanted to do was stumble around in a muddy forest at night.

Suddenly he had a bright idea—he held his forehead from the pain of it. He could try to climb a tall tree so he could scout a larger area looking for the old coot. That, of course, was if he could see well enough through the thick foliage of the treetops. Well, he would try it anyway. He looked around for a thick tree trunk. Soon he came across a gigantic quaking aspen, and there was even a low branch that he could reach.

He began climbing it, wishing he was more like a spider, so he could climb it faster, but he made due progress nevertheless. Soon, he was up about fifty feet, and the branches were thinning out.

He stretched out beyond the branches, and peered around the forest below. He didn't expect to see his friend, or anything else for that matter; but there was Bob, almost right beneath him. He was standing in the middle of a small clearing, holding his arm up high, looking up into a small pine tree.

What the hell is he doing? Jamie wondered.

"BOB!!!" he yelled as loud as he could. Bob paused, looking around him, but did not seem to realize it was directed at him. He resumed his strange stare into the tree.

Jamie squinted his eyebrows, realizing what was wrong with him. Obviously it was Lloyd's Syndrome, but to what extent had it affected him?

Jamie decided that the only way to get him back would be to hurry and get down there before he wandered off.

He began to climb down the tree, watching his step carefully. He was about twenty feet from the ground when suddenly his footing slipped. He grabbed for an overhead branch. His hands grasped onto a small twig-like branch, and suddenly Jamie was suspended by his hands. Slowly but surely, however, he was sliding off the end of the branch; it was slippery due to the recent rain, and Jamie knew it.

"Damn it! I hate rain! I hate mud! And I hate..."

He began falling as the branch's length ran out...

"...treeeeeees!" he screamed. Branches whipped at him as he fell like a rock to the ground. It was a good thing they were there, though, because they slowed his descent rate. With a slight jolt, he landed on his back on the ground. Mud splattered all over the place, and a good deal of it plopped into his face. He wiped it away, and began to let forth some mighty harsh words at everything in general.

He stood up, already feeling sore from the fall, and walked with force in the direction he had seen Bob. Soon he came to the clearing, and found that Bob was still there, looking dumbfounded into the tree.

"Bob!" Jamie screamed, "Just what the hell do you think you're doing? Leaving me all alone like that? What is your problem?!"

Bob looked down slowly, his eyes orienting on Jamie as though he had not a care in the world. “Duh?” he said.

Jamie shook his head, and took a step towards Bob. “C’mon, let’s go,” he said, extending an arm to Bob.

Bob stepped back as if startled. A look of fright came into his eyes. “Greeber-slobber!” he said warningly.

“Oh, hell,” Jamie said. Bob was really losing it this time. Jamie wondered what Lloyd’s Syndrome had done to him.

“So what do you think you are now?” Jamie asked.

“Deebit-globbit!” he said quietly.

Jamie began to get mad. “Well, let’s go.” He stepped forward again, only to have Bob step back.

“Dang it! Come on, you stubborn moron! We have a repeater system waiting for us!”

Jamie jumped forward to grab Bob by the collar of his coat, but, acting like some kind of wild animal, Bob turned and ran, making a chittering noise. “Eet eet eet eet!” Jamie lost his balance and fell, face-first, into the mud. The words he said next are not printable, but some of the nearby vegetation began to wilt, and the surrounding mud dried up. Jamie got to his feet, yelling and wiping the black sludge from his face and arms. He was starting to get very impatient.

Jamie took off running after him. It wasn’t long before he saw Bob again, because he hadn’t gone far. There was a canyon blocking further travel, which Bob stood at the brink of. It was a sheer drop-off that went down about two hundred feet. Far below was the Stevens River, cutting its way through the soil as it had done for so many centuries.

“Bob!” Jamie said, scared that his friend would actually be stupid enough to fall in.

“Freeber-treeber?” Bob said, making absolutely no sense whatsoever.

“Bob, you’ve got to listen to me! You are a human! H-U-M-A-N! Got it? You are not a... well, a whatever you think you are. Look, let’s just go back and put up a repeater. Sound like fun? Repeater? You understand?”

Bob looked at Jamie as though *he* was the loony one. He made a whimpering noise and looked down into the chasm.

Jamie sighed and tried again.

“Bob, I’m coming over to help you. Don’t be afraid. It’s me, Jamie.”

Bob looked at him casually. “Duh?” he asked.

Jamie ignored it. He began to move his legs slowly, creeping very cautiously towards Bob. Bob did not seem to notice.

Jamie continued to talk soothingly to him. “Don’t you remember how we were going to go up and put in that repeater? We were going to have so much fun with it. Just think of all the people that are going to use it! We’ll be able to control everything with tones, man! Think about it, Bob. It’s what you’ve always wanted!”

He continued to creep slowly forward, trying not to make him nervous. But Bob was not blind, just stupid. He took a step back, terrified at Jamie. He was but one last step from falling off the steep drop-off. Jamie saw this and became thoroughly worried. He halted in fear that Bob would take that last step and plunge into the chasm.

“Bob,” he said soothingly, “Don’t move, you’re about to step off a cliff!”

Bob slowly cocked his head, then looked down. Obviously, he still understood some language. He said something unintelligible, then, surprisingly, sat down cross legged. Jamie scowled, not seeing it as an improvement.

“Bob, come on! We have to go.”

Bob didn’t move. He sat there silently, acting like a child, looking over his shoulder down into the canyon. Apparently he was thrilled by the height.

Had Jamie been thinking logically, he would not have done what he did next, but he never thought logically, so he did it anyway. His temper heated and he stepped forward to grab Bob’s shirt collar. “Come, Bob! I’m sick of this! Let’s go back to the truck!” he yelled.

As Jamie reached out for him, though, Bob’s eyes got wide and he leaned back to avoid letting Jamie touch him. As he did so, he

lost his balance, and began to sway dangerously over the edge. He reached out suddenly to grab something, and found Jamie's arm. However, Jamie was skinny and did not weigh enough to counterbalance Bob. Together, they went sailing out into the air. Bob wailed a constant tone, while Jamie created a new vocabulary word.

The two hundred feet suddenly felt like a mile, and Jamie's stomach wound up in his throat as he saw his life pass before his eyes.

What of his repeaters? Who would take over the links? What would be the future of HAM Radio? Then he thought about his family. What would his wife do? Suddenly he felt sorry that he had not told Jasmine he loved her that day. And what about his kids? He couldn't die yet! He still had fourteen kids to get raised properly! He had not yet taught all of them the value of radio!!!

"Ahhhhhh!" he screamed, then "Ooff!" as the wind was knocked out of him. A tree had caught his fall, and he had not been injured. Quietly, he looked about, making sure he was safe. He didn't see Bob, but at the moment he didn't care.

Carefully, he reached up and established a grip on a good branch. He climbed down the tree, shakily, knowing that his life had been spared. Once into a clearing, he looked up, surveying the distance he had fallen.

"Whew!" he said, airily. "Amazing..."

"Hellllllp!" came an anguished call. He whirled around, and located Bob. He was waving his arms pointlessly in the river, beginning to gather speed as he floated down.

Jamie ran to the edge, startled that Bob had once again reverted to normal human actions. It didn't register as an emergency that Bob was destined to plunge over the waterfall about half a mile downstream.

"Hellllllp!" Bob screamed again. This time, Jamie got the message. He scrambled down the bank, catching up with Bob. Running alongside the river, Jamie soon realized that he would have to do something quickly. Bob was gaining momentum faster than Jamie could run. For once, Jamie realized that his radio wasn't going to help... He had left it in the truck! He scanned

the landscape for a quick idea. Nothing came to mind. Jamie yelled out to Bob, “Hey! See if you can grab something!”

Bob shot him a funny look, beginning to swirl around in a small whirlpool. Jamie almost started laughing, but when Bob started back down the river, he got serious again. Jamie ran as fast as he could along the river bank, trying to get ahead of his drifting companion. The whirlpool had bought him some time. Maybe he could drop a tree branch into the river to assist Bob... He looked around for any good sized trees, but all were small saplings that appeared to have just sprung up at the river’s edge. Up ahead, though, he saw a familiar sight! A black tube ran across the canyon about ten feet up from the river. In it, Jamie knew, was his precious coaxial cable. There were a number of lines in it, and at least one was not in use, he figured. He climbed up the slope a small ways, working as fast as he could, before Bob went over the waterfall.

He ripped off the side cover in the coax tube, and peered inside. About fifteen different cables were bundled together, some of which were thicker than others. He looked up the side of the canyon, following the tube. It went up out of sight, but he knew it eventually led to his repeater site, some 3500 feet higher. He pulled on a dark blue line; his reserve line. A small loop came out in his hand. He suddenly realized that it was going to be difficult to pull out all 3500 feet of it. His philosophy was rewarded with the answer when it pulled taut, and would move no more. He needed only about fifty feet! But there was no way he could climb up and fetch his wire cutters. He looked around in desperation.

“Ahhhhh!” Bob yelled, going under for a moment in a strong undercurrent. “Blubbb!” he gurgled.

“Shut up! I’m tryin’ to think, okay?!” Jamie yelled back at him, but Bob couldn’t hear over the roar of the water.

There was a small loop of strong wire that had once been used to anchor the tube to the hill lying on the ground next to Jamie’s foot. He picked it up thoughtfully, wondering how he could use it. It was horseshoe shaped, and did not bend easily.

He looked at it, then up at the tube crossing the river. Suddenly, an idea formed in his brain. This time it did not hurt his head quite as much. The tube was anchored for its weight, so if he were to add weight, it would droop closer down to the river. He decided that his plan was worth a try.

He ripped part of his raincoat off and wrapped strips around his hands.

“Hang on, Bob! I’m coming!” he yelled, staring up the river to spot his friend. Bob was coming closer every moment. He had to act now!

Jamie grabbed the wire tight in one hand, then looped it over the black tube. He grabbed the wire with both hands, and let it pick him off the ground. Suddenly, he went sailing out over the river like a misshapen 7-up™ spot, the sound of the wire against the ridges along the tube making a loud zipping noise.

“Whoa!” Jamie yelled, amazed at his sudden speed. As he approached the center, the tube began to lower, and his speed diminished. Just as his feet nearly touched the water, Bob came cruising along and nearly hit Jamie’s legs. Without having to tell him, Bob grabbed hold, and pulled Jamie farther towards the cold river.

“Ahh! Thank you!” Bob yelled over the roar of the waterfall ahead. He spit water out of his mouth, trying to keep his breath. Then Jamie ran into a problem with his plan; just as he did with most of his plans. *How the hell was he going to get back to shore?* He had no idea, and now his hands were starting to ache from holding the weight of both of them. His grip was weakening and he was slowly slipping off the wire.

“Well! Come on! Let’s get to safety!” Bob accused Jamie of hesitating.

Jamie said nothing, although he considered using his new vocabulary word on Bob to shut him up. Helpless, Jamie could do nothing but gradually let his grip slacken. He knew there was no hope for them now. They were doomed to surrender to the power of the river.

With an embarrassing scream, Jamie felt the wire slip out of his hands. Both HAMs plunged into the cold river again with a rather

dramatic splash. Soon the current had them, and Jamie could see well ahead that the waterfall was their next destination. Once again, Jamie cursed the day he found Bob... Back when he put up his first 220 repeater. If only Bob had been normal! None of this would have ever happened. Bob drifted alongside Jamie, giving him both menacing and hopeful looks as they approached the dreaded waterfall.

They felt the current speed up with the undertow, and before they knew it, they were caught in a whirlwind of cold water and air, the familiar falling sensation strong in their guts. Jamie knew that this, surely, was the end...

They plunged underwater, falling deep into the clear, icy water. Any second, Jamie knew they were either going to smash on the rocks, or drown. He hated water! He hated swimming! If only Breaker had never forced him to swim in P.E. class!

Jamie began to feel light-headed, unable to breathe. He knew that at any second he would pass out. He just couldn't hold his breath any longer... Well, he was right. He did pass out.

"Gug!" he made a small noise underwater, starting to rise, then fell limp.

Chapter 6

Nothing But Love

Jared remembered those old days clearly. He finalized his decision about leaving, knowing that he had to satisfy both his own, and his friends' curiosities. After that, he would try to forget it entirely.

During the migration, he would be able to stay behind for perhaps a couple of weeks, then catch up in late November. He would have time to find his mate again; he knew her well. His young would be determined to go in their own directions by then, but he was not worried about them. They would survive if they were skilled and lucky, perish if not.

At the moment, however, he concerned himself with searching for food. His circling over the desert had surely brought alarm to many small creatures below, however, there were always some doomed to ignore his presence, and they would pay for it with their lives. Ahh, such were the joys of being a top predator... Of course, there were always hardships—many of them in fact, but like everything else, he dealt with them masterfully.

The warm, stiff breezes of the high desert air were a great joy to him as he continued his tedious scan of the ground far below. His shadow fell upon the sagebrush and brown sand, flitting in a hazy pattern over everything. There was an almost imperceptible stirring of sagebrush back towards the ridge, in the shade of the mountains. Altering his flight plan for a sharper circle, he angled back to the ridge, investigating the source of the distraction. As usual, the slightest motion could mean that there was something to be found. Specifically: food.

Watching the same area around the brush, like. . . well, like a Hawk, he knew that if the quarry were to move again, it would not escape his attention. It was certainly not his first time hunting, and a flash of fur, however brief, was very important. Sooner

than expected, the fool rodent made a daring run to another nearby sagebrush. Foolish mistake. Clearly, it had no idea what was upon it. *Good.* The shadows of the mountains, in combination with the tendency of these creatures to forget the skies, were in his favor. Such arrogant lack of caution would bring it ultimate destruction—but what could be said for silly mammals? It would be an easy meal this time.

He had the large mouse pinpointed, even through the somewhat twiggy sagebrush. Unless it had a hole nearby, it was his.

Although it required patient soaring, the fat mouse eventually scampered out into the open. Wasting no time, he maneuvered into a position that would allow him to stoop upon the rodent without alarming it. Not allowing a split second more to pass unused, he tucked his wings to his sides, and began a tremendously swift dive, using only the slightest adjustments to attain full accuracy.

Just a few feet above the unfortunate creature, he terminated his fall with a full, broad extension of his wings. At the same time, he lashed out with a foot, talons outstretched, and gave a death squeeze as he drew it in, landing perfectly. All this was done with pinpoint accuracy and lightning speed. The mouse had noticed him, at the last half second, when there was no time to contemplate the lethal situation. Now, it was all over.

As the legs twitched of the animal, its life slipping away, he bent forward with great flexibility, and twisted the rodent's head with a quick, but powerful jerk of his beak. That ceased its suffering and final flickering of limbs. Blood welled up in the eyes of the head and from where his talons had pierced its flesh. Considering how large it was, it would make a fine meal.

He devoured the bony head, flew off with the remains in firm grasp, and returned to the nest where he knew his young were patiently waiting.

The familiar small faces of his juvenile youngsters greeted him with loud cries as he glided within hearing distance of the cliff-side nest. The three of them were alone; his mate apparently still out hunting. As these little ones grew older, they needed less

constant supervision, and more food; thus, both parents spent more time foraging.

He answered them with a long, raspy cry, sounding every bit as glad to see them as they were he. He came up directly to the rim of the rugged nest, alighting with ease on its edge. All three of them were eager for part of his catch. Generously, he tore it roughly into three pieces, giving each their chance to seize it from his beak as he offered it.

He remained by them, watching with devoted interest as they hastily consumed the mouse. He felt the assorted emotions associated with parenting; a kind of devotion and love, a sense of responsibility, and a kind of pride that they were his to raise and teach. They were indeed beautiful to him, their first adult plumage nearly fully grown, the white down feathers only speckling them, mostly on their heads. They had such innocent eyes, ready to brave the world, not quite knowing the realm outside of the nest. Their feet still impossibly large for them, even cumbersome at times, they stumbled about, constantly preparing for the day their ultimate freedom would come. They grew larger, it seemed, every time he saw them. Together, they nearly filled the nest, making it somewhat crowded; but it didn't matter, for soon they would be leaving it. Their bright yellow eyes looked expectantly at him, as though he would offer another meal.

When he did not, the closest one, Areee, seemed to think that he could find more at his right foot, where he usually brought in their great feasts. Timidly, the youth picked at his feet, trying to determine if there was any more. When he found nothing, the nestling decided instead to pull at the feathers of his father's wing in a playful sort of manner. This one was the rowdy one, but none were ever violent. He suspected that it would be Areee that flew first. The other two, Kri-kli and Shreee, would follow in due course.

He had named them mentally, an unknown habit. Likewise, he was simply Hawk, and his companion, Isheee. The names were superficial, with no meaning, but they seemed to reflect some of the personality of their holders; mostly through association. He

supposed that all animals utilized some kind of mental sound or name, of some sort, for those that they lived with.

Areee looked at his father in a curious manner, expecting him to play as well. However, Hawk was growing tired, and the day was near its end, the sun getting quite low. He nudged Areee back with a gentle push of his head, and took off from the cliffside. The air was wonderfully warm at this time of evening, and with the cliff creating a slope updraft it was perfect for easy soaring.

As the evening dwindled into semi-darkness, the crimson and violet sky of the sunset made him feel once again like forgetting the absurd dreams he'd been having. He was free to roam as he pleased! He did not need to go back and deal with the humans ever again! This was his home; his life: The sun, the desert, the wind, and the clouds. He was happy here, and needed nothing else—but some mad concern for his friends had him convinced that he should at least find them. And what of his long lost human family? What had become of them?

He felt sad that he was even remembering it now. If only he would have completely forgotten, then he would have been unconcerned, and thus, perfectly content about his existence. But he decided that perhaps complexities were part of life. In order to be content, there had to be problems to offset it. *Well, he told himself, I'll go back just long enough to know how they are. After that, I will forget and never return.*

The sunset was absolutely beautiful, especially from the air. As he circled his cliff in silence, he saw Ishee glide in from the north, also on silent wings. He was reminded of the noisy environment of the humans, and suddenly the sunset seemed even more vibrant and inviting. Quickly, he decided not to worry any more about it, at least not until migration.

He dived down though the still air, and approached his cliffside nest on careful wings. Ishee was there, tending to the last meal for the day. He landed on an adjacent outcropping of rock, in full view of the nest. He looked on with admiration to the four Hawks he saw on that cliff. He realized with a kind of irony that he had finally found love. Something he had stayed away

from for so long; now it was here. Not just Isheee, but this whole life. Everything was as he could only have dreamed.

As the sun set, he perched farther into the wall of the cliff; the cold desert night opposite the day's heat. After a few moments, he was aware of the presence of Isheee, who had landed on the same cliff-side as he. He saw that she had found a suitable place to rest, and with distant thoughts he fell asleep, head bowed. The desert fell comfortingly silent.

Chapter 7

Search

The library in Logatropolis reflected the size of the city. There were terminals for everything in one room or another. It had books practically lined to the ceiling. Most of which were ancient, made out of real paper from trees. Now, books were either electronic or were printed on synthetic paper, called Writus (after the man who invented the cheap process). The nicest thing about the library was the fact it had huge funding, and thus had extensive research facilities. Most of its funding came through the massive tourism that sprouted because of ButtarsVision Productions.

Jared was always amazed at the library when he came. He had to stop and just look around at the floor-to-ceiling shelves of books; the rows and rows of computer-reference desks; the automatic robotic sorting systems and, his favorite; the video tridimensional research facility. He would have liked to examine everything more closely, but he didn't have time. After he finished with this, he had to get home to his family, then prepare for a big day tomorrow.

A number of people looked up at him from their tables, noticing that it was the great Mr. Buttars. Many of them waved or voiced greetings. He walked into a room that contained the impressive collection of newspapers from all over the country. Even though it was all on crystallide media, or magneto-optical disk, the reduced size of the newspapers still filled the room. He found a reference terminal, and began looking for newspapers with certain events. He looked up his old friend by name, trying to find any articles that mentioned his disappearance. Many articles came up, rather to his surprise. Almost all of them were to be found in Oregon papers, and almost all of them dealt with some discovery or major advance in veterinary medicine for birds. Jared shook

his head, having not previously realized just how much his high-school friend had contributed in that field. He just hadn't realized the scope of it.

One article came up that was different from all the rest:

PORTLAND EVENTS — Issue 892

LIBRARY CODE # 10297 - 055 - 0892

TITLE: "Scientist Missing at 28"

BRIEF TEXT: "One of the most respected and well-known avian researchers, Dr. Jared W. Yelton, DVM has recently turned up missing from his expansive research laboratory in Portland..."

He hit a print key, and the reference number came out on a slip of writus. He had found at least one important article, he hoped it would help more than the report he had seen on Unsolved Mysteries so long ago. He cleared the terminal, and paced along one of the long shelves, searching for a match with the library code number he had. Eventually, a case had the guide numbers printed on it that would contain the correct disk. He found it and proceeded to a terminal, growing curious to what kind of extra information he might obtain from it. The computer had given him the first line of the article, and it had been enough to interest him thoroughly. He put it in the terminal, and punched in the library code. The machine quickly found it, and asked in a friendly computer voice if he would like to view or print it. He responded that he would like it printed, and promptly, the article appeared on a piece of writus that came out of the desk's print slot. He took it, and examined the article fully:

PORTLAND EVENTS

SEPTEMBER 18, 2005

~ Scientist Missing at 28 ~

One of the most respected and well-known avian researchers, Dr. Jared W. Yelton, DVM, has recently turned up missing from his expansive research laboratory in Portland. Cooperating with officials, the employees at the facility are similarly baffled at this sudden disappearance.

According to the investigative report, detectives were unable to find any evidence of struggle or unlawful activity. Some characteristics of the situation seemed to point accusingly at suicide, although there was, of course, no trace of Dr. Yelton.

As was noted in the initial report, the only abnormal thing within the office where Dr. Yelton was last, was the small glass syringe and vial. It would seem to the casual observer that he had injected himself with some type of lethal poison, or such; but extensive tests on the bottle have revealed absolutely nothing about its nature. Chemists have determined only that the solution was nonlethal, but having only a small amount to work with, they were not able to guess its true purpose. Aside from this small piece of evidence, there was nothing to identify the situation behind this bizarre case of evanescence.

Local authorities are still searching for further leads on this case, and “we hope also to come across the personage, or, with regret, the body of our missing friend,” said Lt. John Dunbar, a chief investigator in this episode. “What we find hard to understand is why he might [choose] to vanish at such a critical time in his field of research.” Among the most amazing criteria during the investigation, was the staff report of a precocious, highly developed new treatment for injured birds. It was instigated and finalized by Dr. Yelton, just before this incident. Apparently, according to the staff officials working with him, it will “revolutionize and expand the entire process by which we diagnose and treat . . . injured birds”.

Further details of the case, including some of the latest behaviors of Dr. Yelton and other possible causes for concern were not out of the ordinary.

Associates and coworkers say there was no cause (or evidence, for that matter) for alarm or hostile acts. Security in the laboratory was top-notch, and officials seriously doubt a case of criminal action.

Local authorities have declared that the case be pursued for “as long as necessary”, and that the doctor will not be officially declared as missing until “further evidence suggests otherwise”, or until an extended period of time has passed.

Dr. Yelton was 28 years old, and had been working extensively with raptors and birds for at least thirteen years. His facility was among the few in the nation to establish the scientifically acclaimed ‘Isidor’s Method’, or new age method in which to treat and rehabilitate injured or recovering birds. In 2001 he became the Official Representative of the Northwest Veterinary Association of Ornithology; in early 2002 he began the nationwide program to fully repopulate the Golden Eagle. Recently, in August of 2004 he established an environmental policy regarding public exhibition and/or facility of raptors, also known as the Raptor Educational and Provisionary Act. These are but few among his many great steps towards greater understanding and respect for raptors and birds alike.

A committee is scheduled to meet on September 22 discussing the issue; the time and location of which will be announced from commit-

tee chairperson, Dr. Averly Meyers tomorrow at a briefing with the press. Further information may be posted at that time.

Jared studied the article carefully, remembering the time he first saw the incident on TennaVision, some two months after it really happened. Again, he felt the same feelings of regret when he realized that his friend was gone. He had found Jamie, true, but he would never be quite content until he came to his own conclusions about his other friend's fate.

He tucked the writus into a pocket, and headed to the video department. A robot arm lowered behind him and took the disk he had been using. The filing system was truly amazing.

He was going to find a copy of the report he had seen on TennaVision, one way or another. There was a long line at the video desk, with a tired looking employee trying desperately to help a confused customer. Of course, he did have a little social status going for him. . . . As Jared entered the area, once one person saw him, the shock of his visit quickly traveled up the line like a wave, and soon the librarian motioned at him to proceed to the front of the line. Ahh, such were the benefits of good movie making! Jared casually stepped to the front, acknowledging the friendly smiles and gestures from those in the line. No one seemed to mind. He nodded to the librarian as she cleared her desk, in case she might have any serious work to do for him. She was an elderly lady, wearing petite glasses with a narrow strap fit only for an old bossy lady. She seemed younger than she looked, but deceptively, her looks were approaching 'terrible.'

"Can I help you, Mr. Buttars, Sir?"

"Yes, I am looking for a TennaVision production."

"Hmm," the librarian sighed. She seemed a little awed that he had come to the library, instead of having someone else do it for him. She dismissed it as insignificant, and asked, "And what might it be?"

"Well, it's an old copy of Unsolved Mysteries."

"Okay," she seemed happier, knowing that the library had a huge inventory of those shows. "What was the date on that? Or the subjects covered?"

“It would be about November of 2005. It was concerning the disappearance of a man in Oregon.”

“Okay, just a minute,” she began typing into her computer. Starting pleasant conversation, she mentioned casually, “I really enjoyed *Day For A Daydream*. It was the best movie I have seen all year.”

“Oh, well thank you,” Jared replied, hardly believing that a timid old lady like this could actually enjoy such a violent show.

“Really,” she went on, “I haven’t seen blood that looked so real in all my years of movie-going.”

Jared’s eyebrows raised in surprise. *Wow!* This lady really was sadistic. “Well, I never settle for poor special effects,” he explained.

“And the explosions! They were terrific! I mean, you could really see the bodies flying!”

“Umm, thank you,” Jared stopped short, beginning to feel a little uneasy. Some of the people behind him began to converse as well, talking about how great his production was.

“Oh, and the way that guy handled grenades! What a hunk!” the librarian had stopped typing, she was fully engaged in talking of his movie.

“Well, he was a highly trained actor, for exactly that reason,” Jared said, not sure whether to change the subject or accept the praise.

The librarian seemed to have no intention of stopping, however. She went on about the quality cinematographic camera work, and the realism of the screams of terrified citizens. Jared continued to thank her and explain briefly each thing. He was beginning to get impatient, though.

Soon, everyone in the line was crowding around him, starting to ask questions and compliment him for the film. Apparently, not a single person had disliked the production. He felt amazed. *What kind of people are these, anyway? Did they really like mass violence as much as they seemed to?* Jared began to have second thoughts about the gore of that last production.

“Ahh, Miss? Could I just have the reference number to that video?”

“*To Day For A Daydream?* I should think you would have plenty of copies of it yourself! You are so wonderfully talented!”

“No, Miss, I mean of *Unsolved Mysteries*.”

“Oh, that,” she seemed suddenly bored. “Of course, here you are.” She handed him a writus with the location of the video.

“Thank you, Miss.”

“You can call me Tandy, if you would like.”

Jared reeled when he heard the name. Somewhere, perhaps back in high-school, he had heard that name... If only he could remember who... He didn’t recognize her, but he felt he should be leaving. . . immediately.

“Ahh, yes. Be well,” he said, in his usual manner, and quickly turned to leave. The sounds of conversation about his movie continued as he left, and he felt abruptly confused, not sure whether that hit had been worth it or not.

He dismissed the issue for later pondering, and quickly found the *Unsolved Mysteries* video. He checked it out quickly, and headed out to his stretched BMW. He had the option of having a chauffeur, and took prompt advantage of it. He had hated to drive since he first learned how, and now he took great joy in not having to deal with the absurd traffic.

“Where to, Sir?” asked Mr. Orrin.

“Home, please, Chad.”

“Very well,” he said, putting the car into drive.

Jared sat back and breathed a sigh of relief. He was glad to get that over with.

His TennaPhone rang, and he suddenly had more business to contend with. He dealt with it over the phone, using the on-board DiffuScan and his wrist-top computer.

The window between driver and passenger closed as Chad put on some of his famous New York Opera classics. Jared preferred film scores, strange music, or instrumental when the time was right, but now he wanted silence. Chad could have his music, for all he cared.

“Yes, Mr. Stoneworth, I have the compiled report for your use...” he paused as he was interrupted. “Of course. That is in there.” There was a long silence as Jared listened to the person on the

TennaPhone. “No, certainly not. I take great pride in knowing that I am environmentally conscious. . . what’s that?” He waited again for the reply. “Yes, sir. Take care and be well.”

He hung up the TennaPhone with a push of a button. Then he leaned back once more and relaxed, his day of business was over. Even the great task of movie-making could get to be extremely stressful. He was glad to be done for the evening.

The car drove through the busy highway, the interior quietly separated from the outside noise. Jared opened the cabinet in front of him, and a tray slid out with assorted glasses and bottles. He carefully fixed himself a mixed drink; dipping a little Nestle’s Quik from a crystal cylinder, then added a squirt of vanilla extract and two cubes of ice. He liked it shaken, not stirred, so he placed it into the mobile shaker, and waited until it was finished. There was nothing like a good ‘chocolate milk on the rocks’ after a long day of exhausting clients and directing.

Eventually, Chad turned off the main road and proceeded up a hill. Soon, he came to a gate with two marble pillars on either side. Granite lions guarded each gate post, and an intercom sat upon a pedestal near the driver’s side window. Chad pressed a button on it, and gave his voice ID. The gate swung open mechanically, and a digital recording of a Lion’s roar warned them that they were in Buttars’ territory.

Jared still liked to hear that roar. It was a sign of feline power and grace. He had, of course, always liked cats. An old friend of his, Jamie’s father, in fact, had installed a professional outdoor speaker system to do full justice to the beauty of the roar.

The car wound up the half-mile long driveway, and soon came to the edge of his expansive front yard. A small stream ran along it, with cattails growing in dense groups. Princess, his prize catamount (mountain lion), strolled magnificently through the front yard. A group of house cats took little catnaps on his front porch, seeming to enjoy the cool evening. Some were engaged in play with toy catnip mice. A Gray Catbird flew in from somewhere and landed with ease in a Catalpa tree that he had imported from Wisconsin. Lining the walk to his door were clusters of Catmint. Caterpillars could be found among the leaves of some Catbrier

vines. He had a freshwater pond full of catfish. His wife had planted a variety of beautiful flowers, most of them a delicate wildflower called Cat's Ear. Truly, Jared loved his home, and his wife worked hard on the landscape around. Together, they had really created a gorgeous home.

Chad turned onto a circle drive and stopped before the front door. He stepped out and opened the door for Jared, who got out and turned to survey his land from the porch area. He took a deep breath and smiled to Chad.

"Nothing like a little fresh air, eh?" he asked.

Chad straightened his chauffeur's cap and nodded. "It is nice," he commented.

Jared leaned on the car and felt proud that he had achieved his goals. Beyond the tall trees was Logatropolis, laid out like a giant living map, a great city. Jared was glad, though, that he lived privately up on this hill. He owned nearly fifty acres of land, and all of it surrounded by tall trees and green land.

"Well, I think you can turn in for the night," Jared told him.

Chad opened the trunk and took out Jared's briefcase. "Yes, Sir. Thank you."

"I'll see you in the morning as usual."

Chad seemed to be lingering. He coughed a bit and held out a hand.

"Oh, of course!" Jared said, startled. Chad did good work. Jared dug in his pockets for some change. He found nothing suitable. He fidgeted around, looking for some kind of tip to give to Chad. *Oh, well*, he decided. He spit the gum he had been chewing into his hand and passed it along to Chad, who looked down at it, dismayed and disgusted.

"Ahh, wait till the end of the month, I'll include my tips with your regular paycheck."

Chad tossed the gum and nodded to Jared. "Good night, Sir," he said warmly.

"Be well."

Chad got back in the car and parked it in Jared's garage. Jared walked around amusingly in front of his house, just glad to be alone for a bit.

A noisy engine started, and Chad pulled out of the garage in his own car; a beat up Volkswagen. Jared sighed at the noise, then decided not to fuss; at least Shad was a good driver.

Jared called to Princess, who came prancing up and sniffed at his hand.

“Good girl, Princess! Here’s a treat for you,” he gave her some kind of cat treat, which she enjoyed immensely. The large mountain lion curled up on the front steps and contentedly licked at her paws. Jared watched her for a minute, then went inside.

The house seemed quiet for some reason.

“Hello?” Jared called, setting his briefcase down to loosen his tie. “Anyone home?”

His wife came around the corner, and answered him, “Yes! Glad you’re home honey!”

“Ahh, what a day,” Jared sighed, putting the briefcase on the foyer table.

“Well, you can tell me all about it over dinner,” Jenny said, helping him out of his coat.

“Daddy! Daddy!” three screaming kids ran out from the hall. “Daddy! You’re home!”

Jared knelt down and hugged the twins. “Hello, you guys! How’s it going?” The others were either busy or gone. Steve, his sixteen year old, was at a boy-scout camp, and Jennifer was staying at a friend’s house.

“Just fine,” ten-year old Greg said, “Did you bring me anything?”

“Just a lot of love.”

Greg seemed disappointed. Tyler entered the area quietly, “Hi Dad,” he said quickly.

“Hi there,” Jared returned, standing up. “I’m hungry, let’s eat!”

Jenny smiled and turned for the kitchen.

The evening with his family was a welcome one. It seemed like he never got a break anymore. True, he enjoyed his work immensely, and would trade nothing for it. But it did get tiresome, especially with a demand such as his. He peered at an account book closely at his study desk, and checked off some figures.

It was getting late, and the kids had long gone to bed. He was alone in the warm room, listening to the ticking of his mother's old grandfather clock. He finished his business and piled the account books in a corner of the desk.

He retrieved his briefcase from the closet, and began looking through some of the things he had collected that day. The HAM Radio group report, the newspaper article, and the TennaVision broadcast video he had rented from the library.

He glanced at the clock, seeing that it was 11:30. He sighed, wishing there was more time in a day.

He walked over to the bookshelf and opened a cabinet that covered his study's small entertainment system. It was a bit out of date, but then again, it would work fine with the video he had borrowed. His real theatre was in its own room entirely. He placed the cassette into a slot, and gave it the voice command to begin playback.

Feeling slight déjà vu, Jared watched as the report slowly got to the part about his friend. His mind looked past the ancient film techniques and incredibly poor graphics. His concern was focused on the details of the story, not the medium it was presented in.

The camera showed his laboratory and the desk he had been sitting at. It showed the small syringe and the bottle, just as Jared remembered from the first time the report aired. Then there was something that he hadn't noticed the first time: the wall safe. When the camera panned across the safe behind the picture, he got a glance into it. He thought he saw something suspicious, something that only his friend would have ever had in an arrangement like that... Jared backed up the video and played it through in slow motion. This time, he even noticed what picture the safe was behind. When he was sure he knew what he was seeing, he stopped the video on the frame, and pressed a print button. As a piece of writus zipped from a slot with the full color picture on its surface, he relaxed in his chair, beginning to have serious thoughts about the true reason behind the disappearance of his friend. He found himself breathing more rapidly,

startled by what he had missed before. How could he have not paid attention?

In silence, he turned off the system, put the picture on his desk, and turned off the lights in the study.

He had made a decision: In a couple of days, he was going to Oregon.

Chapter 8

Recovery

Jamie was desperately cold when he regained consciousness. He had been washed up onto the bank of the wide river. He moaned as he opened his eyes. They stung with the effort, as they had received a fair amount of sand and murky water. He sat up slowly, his back aching like crazy. He had a massive headache and a bruised shoulder.

“Owwww!” he yelled as he realized he was in a very poor condition. Balancing himself until he felt he wasn’t going to topple over backwards, he rolled his neck to alleviate the pains in it. He sat there for a good ten minutes, just trying to relax and get a grip on the situation. His thought was to yell for Bob again, but his throat was hurting and hoarse from the excessive amount of river he had swallowed.

He began to look around, trying to find out where he was, and if Bob was still with him. It was dark now that the sun had long since set and the trees were thicker. He could scarcely see outside of the faint light of the moon. The trees surrounding him seemed hauntingly tall and forbidding, the somewhat distant noise of the waterfall strangely overpowering, and the night sounds in the forest repetitive and discomfoting. He took a deep breath and abruptly found that he was shivering profusely. He folded his arms around him trying to stay warm, but the cool forest and his wet clothes made him feel as though he was suffering from hypothermia. He stood up, with difficulty, and began searching for some kind of shelter or warmth.

His tired, aching legs refused to carry him far, so when he soon saw a flickering light ahead he was very glad indeed. Through the low branches of the trees, he could not tell how far away it was, or really, what its source was, but he pressed on towards it

regardless. Any light in this infernal forest was a welcome sight to him.

Feeling the pangs from lack of exercise, he stumbled wearily towards the glow. It seemed much farther than it actually was, but to his amazement he soon found himself on the edge of a small campground. A few people were gathered around a cozy looking fire, presumably telling each other ghost stories. A skinny guy with glasses and a handheld radio on his waist (Jamie noticed those things quickly) was telling the current story. He seemed to be in his forties, and wore a dark cap with the label “ALIEN3” on it. Two teenagers and what appeared to be his wife listened attentively as he drew to the climax of his story.

“...and so the small family was stranded. They looked all around for firewood and started a fire, hoping to keep warm. The madman was gone, they hoped.”

The storyteller suddenly leaned forward, a look of serious business on his round face. The scary part was coming up.

“But later that night, as they slept, the small boy heard a crack of a twig in the forest nearby. He looked up, but only in time to see...”

Jamie was getting tired of watching — he was cold and needed warmth from that fire! He stepped forward into the clearing just as the man finished his story with a crazy, loud voice...

“...the Madman!!!” he bellowed frantically.

The entire family saw Jamie at the same moment and nearly screamed their poor heads off. The man looked up, surprised the story had been so effective. He saw Jamie lumbering into the clearing, looking like he had been dragged along behind a horse for ten miles. The Swamp Thing could not have been much more handsome. He cried out himself, and fell off the stump he’d been sitting on.

The entire family scrambled behind the logs they had been seated on as Jamie raised a hand to show he meant no harm. Suddenly he realized that he had intruded at a rather inconvenient time, yet remarkably on schedule. . .

He tried to greet them, “I’m so glad to meet you!” But his voice was hoarse and raspy and instead his words sounded like “I

am going to eat you!” The reaction Jamie got was *not* what he had expected at all.

The family crawled away from the clearing and then dove into a large camper trailer, closing the door quickly behind them. The man’s frightened expression appeared after a short time in one of the rectangular windows.

Suddenly Jamie had an idea! His headache suddenly became unbearable and he had to kneel on the ground to recover his stamina. Sometimes those ideas really hurt!

He reached down to his ankle and felt for a familiar holster. He felt a small bump and let forth a sigh of relief. He pulled up his pants-leg and unsnapped the strap on the leather pocket. He pulled from it a small bundle in plastic wrapping. It was his all-purpose emergency handheld radio. Fortunately he had packed it in waterproof baggies.

With stiff fingers, he managed finally to remove the radio from its protective covering and turned it on. The display lit up and the tones of its power-up greeted him. He was overjoyed at his foresight. He held up the radio and waved it to the face in the window, hoping the man would realize he was a friend.

The expression of the timid fellow changed from complete fear to an almost peaceful serenity. Within seconds the family began to emerge from the camper and apologize for running away so shamefully. Jamie was impressed by the power of friendship the image of a simple radio could inspire.

The man took note of Jamie’s shivering form and motioned for him to join them near the fire.

Jamie smiled and gladly took a seat on a cut tree stump. The fire began to breathe life into his aching muscles.

“Sorry about that little misunderstanding there. The name’s Fizzy. John Fizzy.”

Now it was Jamie’s turn to be startled. Old Fizzy-G, here? Of all places and times!

“John?” he asked.

“Gosh, isn’t that what I just said? Who are you?”

“Jamie! I’m Jamie Forbush. Remember me from high-school?”

John studied Jamie carefully, hardly able to tell through all the caked mud and greasy river slime. Then he realized it was really him, and extended a hand in friendly greeting. “Well, never thought I’d see you again,” he said.

“Me, too!” Jamie shook his head in disbelief. “But I’m glad it was you and not someone else.”

“Yeah, I guess you could say that,” John said. “Well, have a seat and some hot chocolate, you can wash up in our RV shower over there.” He pointed to the massive RV with all its antennas and lights.

Jamie looked anew, and was impressed. “How did you get up here and not get stuck?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Wasn’t it muddy when you drove up here?”

“A little. It hadn’t started to rain quite as hard when we came up the road. What are you doing up here all alone like this?”

“Well, it’s a long story,” Jamie told him.

“Hmm. Why don’t you go wash up, and then you can tell us before we hit the sack.”

“All right,” Jamie replied. “Sounds good.”

Jamie casually, but stiffly walked over to the RV and disappeared inside. He was thoroughly impressed by the sheer size of the device. He had never seen anything so luxurious on wheels. He got undressed and loaded his grimy clothes into a mobile ultrasonic washer and found the shower. He was glad to get rid of the filthy river muck.

Three hours passed before he finally emerged from the steaming bathroom. He got dressed and marveled at the various devices John had carefully installed in his Wannabagel. Many of them looked like new TennaWave stations and satellite communications interfaces. He didn’t see any sign of an old fashioned HAM radio.

He exited the mobile home and seated himself next to the fire once again.

“What took so long? We thought you might have passed out from the temperature change or something. I was just about to make sure you were okay.” John looked bewildered.

“Oh, I’m fine. Just a little sore from what I’ve been through, but I’m okay,” Jamie checked some of the cuts and bruises on his arms.

John seemed satisfied and relaxed a little. “You sure had us scared there.” His wife, covered in a blanket on a nearby log, nodded. “Tell me what you’re up to,” John finished.

The rest of John’s family appeared to have already fallen asleep inside a tent they had set up. Why anyone would sleep in a tent with an RV nearby escaped him.

He told his story of the unsuccessful attempt to get to the top of the mountain in the rain. He spoke about Bob Lloyd and how he had gotten lost and what a journey it had become to try to find him. He told John about the cliff, the cable duct, and the waterfall.

John whistled at the waterfall part. “Gee, Jamie! How many times do you fall in an average day?”

“Way too many,” he said, remembering the sickening sight of the world spinning around during one of his drops.

John sipped at his hot chocolate, and looked around. “So Bob is still missing?”

“Yeah,” Jamie said, peering into the trees as well, “That idiot is going to get me killed one of these days.”

“Where do you think he went?”

“I don’t know. I fell over the waterfall with him, and I haven’t seen him since.”

“Oh, dear,” John’s wife interrupted. “The poor man must be freezing to death!”

“Well,” Jamie explained, “he’s a strange guy. He seems to do okay in emergencies, it’s just that I can never figure out how Lloyd’s Syndrome will affect him.”

“Lloyd’s Syndrome? What’s that?” John asked.

“Oh, it’s a rare disease that affects the mind. Kind of like Alzheimer’s, but it doesn’t just make you forget things. It can change who *and* what you think you are. It usually happens when he gets bored or if he gets hit really hard or something.”

“It sounds serious!” his wife sounded worried.

“Well, he usually comes through just fine. I’m sure he’s all right.”

Jamie talked with them for the rest of the evening while they listened with interest. Someone eventually pointed out that it was nearing midnight, and they should be turning in for the night.

Jamie decided to worry about his friend in the morning. There was no chance of finding him in the dark. He borrowed a sleeping bag and thanked the Fizzies for their generosity.

The next morning he set off early to look for Bob. With a warm good-bye and a small pack of supplies from Mr. Fizzy, he felt refreshed, and only a little sore from the previous night. What a hellish nightmare! He never wanted to get near a river again!

He began trekking through the forest, almost getting accustomed to searching for Bob. Once he had traveled a fair distance, he found a nice tall tree, and considered climbing it to find Bob more quickly. With jarring memories, he recalled his first experience with trees, and decided against it. He was getting very sick and tired of Nature. He only wished he could sue the person responsible for all this mayhem, however, he knew that it was only Bob and himself. He wished for the day that developers would come and just plow the entire place over.

He knew that it would be harder to find Bob this time, he’d had a longer time to get lost. Jamie felt positive that Bob had survived the waterfall plunge; he was a durable person. After so many years of soldering and tuning radios, Bob could survive almost anything. Jamie found a trail and began to walk slowly along it, searching for signs of someone’s passage.

After about an hour of frustration and unfamiliar terrain, Jamie began to devise a plan to assassinate Bob once he found him. He was sick and tired of Bob and his crazy disease. But each time he considered it, he thought more and more, and finally decided he’d have to wait until the repeater was up and running. . . .

Soon it was noon, and Jamie had been walking around the forest for better than five hours. His radio was running low on battery power, and he was getting hungry. He desperately needed

to find an outlet with a charge adapter and perhaps some food for himself.

He was about to get very impatient with the whole situation, and was considering abandoning Bob for good. He tried a last call on the radio for help.

“CQ CQ CQ! This is N7XLH!”

He listened for the quiet courtesy tone on his repeater, and waited for a kind of response. A few moments later, it came:

“Ahka Lahka Peesay!”

Jamie cocked his head at the radio in question. He pressed a few tones to figure out what kind of link was set up. The system responded with an outdated synthetic voice module that the link to Fiji was operative. Well, he would get no help from there! He turned off the link and set it to ‘Statewide,’ where it should have been in the first place.

Yet there remained no response from the radio. He turned it off to conserve battery power, and once again forged onward, alone in the strange forest.

Now, where would Bob go? Jamie asked himself. *That depends on what kind of person or thing he thinks he his.* Jamie groaned at the thought of that stupid problem again. He had no way of even guessing. *If I had just been an astronaut, none of this would even be happening!*

His thoughts began to meander just as pointlessly as the path he was taking through the forest. He was by no means a forester. He was continuously going around in a large circle, unable to hold a steady direction. At his present rate, he would never find Bob.

After Jamie noticed a distinct tree that he had passed at least a dozen times, he figured it out and suddenly realized he had no idea where he was going. He, too, was lost.

He paused for a while, resting against a tree, trying to calm himself and figure out how to get back to the truck. He might just as well forget about Bob and get out of here on his own!

Instead of trying to follow a trail, he decided to beeline it for the mountain side. Somewhere, he would have to cross the road they had been on — he hoped.

He sighted a line of travel, and started for it, walking at a brisk pace. He was leaving, and that was all there was to it.

Jamie was carefully picking his way across a steep rocky slope when he saw a cave ahead. Not really knowing why, except perhaps out of curiosity, he decided to check it out.

He entered with a slight echo of his footsteps, and looked for a flashlight. If he had ever been carrying one, it wasn't with him now. Well, he wasn't without a backup option. He grabbed his radio, and opened up the back panel. (He was so good at it, he didn't need a tiny screwdriver.) He looked at it for a second, turned a potentiometer with his fingernail, and closed it. There, now the backlight to the display had been beefed up a bit. He turned it on, and pressed the small 'light' button. Instead of providing a slight glow for the display, the light shined brightly into the cave ahead. Jamie felt a kind of pride in being able to make emergency modifications to delicate equipment.

He began exploring the cave, not paying attention to the pressing matters at hand. He liked the feeling of hard rock under his feet; it reminded him of asphalt and concrete. Plus, there weren't trees and rivers and such to worry about. Just solid walls and ceiling like the hallways of his city home. Up ahead, around a slight curve, he saw a flickering light against the darkness. He was immediately interested, and continued on to investigate.

When he turned the corner, his eyebrows went up in surprise, and he found himself speechless. There, sitting behind a small fire, was Bob. He had a large hat on, and was peering down at a roasted 'something' turning on a spit over the fire. Bob looked up at the noise of the intrusion.

"G'day, Mate!"

Jamie still was baffled. Had he found Bob by *forgetting* about him?

"Mistah, ya' look as though you've seen a Tasmanian Devil! Why don'tcha siddown and have a bit o' this 'ere roast snake, eh? Tastes like crap, but ya' can eat it."

Jamie shook his head and sat down by the fire, constantly staring at Bob. Or was it Bob? Where did he get that hat? But of course it was Bob! Jamie would recognize his funny face any-

where. Then it struck him: *Lloyd's Syndrome*. He sighed. Well, at least this time Bob was coherent.

“Bob?” Jamie asked him.

“Nah. Name’s Mick. And you?”

Jamie thought the name sounded familiar. He let it pass though, seeing that Bob was acting fairly decent for once. “My name is Jamie,” he said. “Don’t you remember me?”

Bob looked at him carefully, then shrugged as he turned the spit again. “Don’t recall seein’ ya’ before. You new around these parts?”

“Well, no, not really, I guess,” Jamie started. “Look, Bob... I mean, Mick, let’s go. I really need to get home sometime soon.”

Bob didn’t look up from the fire. “Takes about half an hour for these to cook, ya’ know.”

Jamie ignored him. “Do you know the way back to the road?”

Bob poked at the snake with a huge knife. Jamie had no idea where he had got it. “Road’s about a couple miles from here. It’d take most of an hour to get there.”

“Good,” Jamie breathed a sigh of relief. Bob thought he was someone else, but as long as he knew how to get them out of there, so much the better. “Let’s get moving, then.”

Bob looked up at him for once, pulling the knife out of the snake with a tug. “Ya’ gotta eat if ya’ gonna live, ya’ know.”

“I know!” Jamie said quickly, eyeing the knife, “but we gotta go first!”

Bob shook his head slowly, giving Jamie a threatening look. “That ain’t the way of the bushman. You eat first, then go.”

Jamie saw no point in arguing, he *was* hungry. But for a roast snake? “Well, have you got anything else?”

Bob looked blank.

“Besides the snake.”

Bob looked behind him and brought a small package forth. “I got this,” he showed Jamie.

Jamie could see nothing edible. “What is it?”

“It’s deer jerky,” Bob explained.

He reached for it eagerly, and Bob handed it over. For a moment he had experienced visions of something worse than dead snake.

Bob must have decided the snake was done. He removed it and began to tear down the spit as Jamie unwrapped the jerky. "So whereabouts ya' from, Mistah Jamie?" he asked, casually.

Jamie figured that he might as well play along. He would have to take him to the hospital when this was all over with, and see about a cure for his mental illness. "I'm from Logatropolis," he said, biting into a rough stick of jerky.

"Hmmp. Never heard o' that place. Me, I'm from the outback." He lifted the charred snake to his mouth and took a generous bite.

"Yeah," Jamie agreed, trying not to watch. He liked the deer meat, though. "Where did you get this jerky? It's good."

"Ah," Bob began, reminiscing. "This doe came outta this grove o' trees, and I threw my knife at 'er. Got 'er right 'ere in the side," he patted a side of his chest. "Wasn't very big, but she'll last a while."

Jamie cocked an eyebrow, wondering if there were limits to the syndrome and how it could change him. From a peaceful, shy HAM radio operator, to a talented, knowledgeable tracker and hunter was quite a contrast.

"Bob. . ." Jamie started.

"Huh?"

"I mean, Mick. We've got to get going, and you're the only one who knows how to get us out of here."

Bob looked pleased. "Well, glad I kin be o' some use to ya'." He looked around, picked up a pack of stuff wrapped in deer hide, and stood up. "Let's be gittin', then."

Jamie stood up, too, and turned his radio back on. He felt the first happiness he had felt in a long time. For once things were going right! Well, basically, anyway. Bob snuffed the fire and started walking out of the cave, a few steps in front of Jamie.

"How do you see where you're going?" Jamie asked.

"Ya' get good eyes for th' dark after bein' a bushman as long as I 'ave."

“Oh,” he replied, simply. Jamie followed with his radio-light, and hungrily devoured the jerky. Bob munched on his roast snake for a time before stashing it with the rest of his stuff.

They soon emerged from the cave, and began climbing up the steep mountain slope. Bob told Jamie fascinating stories of crocodiles and women; both in the ‘hard-to-handle’ category. Jamie listened patiently and agreed with everything, following his ‘guide’ back to the road. He was beyond desperate and would tolerate any length of Bob’s narrative.

The forest eventually began to thin out and Jamie recognized the area surrounding the road. They walked uphill a few hundred paces and soon the welcome sight of his truck met his eyes. The repeater waited patiently for him in the back.

Chapter 9

Owyhee

They were late this year in raising young. By this time they should have fledged and learned to fly and hunt. In this warm climate, however, they could afford to be late; the young would not be greatly affected. The problem this year was the unexpected, completely insane journey Hawk had devised to visit his friends in the human world. Somehow, he had to come up with a way to work it in. When migration began, he would only need to take a week or so to detour from the usual flyway. He guessed it would not be hard to find Jared and Jamie.

The names had finally come out of the dreamy messages. In some way, they seemed strange and awkward. He had long since forgotten the human tongue. But he could hear their names in his head, even their voices. If nothing else, he had the advantage of searching from the air. The only part he truly dreaded, even feared, was the prospect of going back into the monstrosity of human civilization. He was frightened of the progress of their technology. What kinds of things would they have floating or flying around in the air that he would have to be careful of? Many times he had seen human things fly noisily far overhead but rarely any other sign of human life. Only once had he ventured close enough to encounter a roadway with cars and trucks traveling its unbroken surface.

Hawk cast those thoughts aside in ire, and decided to cross that range when he flew to it². At the moment, he was perched on a ledge across the canyon from his nest, waiting for the sun to warm the land, and the winds to swirl the beautiful red dust. Isheec was nearby on the ledge, enjoying dawn's warmth, too.

² Figure of screech.

He went about the usual morning chores of preening feathers, scratching, and calling. Mornings were a time to relax watch the desert come to life. A time to watch the sunrise, and savor the feeling of being alive.

He looked at the distant range where the sun was peeking up. The Owyhee Mountains. He remembered seeing that with different eyes, almost seven years ago, when he had visited them as something else. He remembered feeling hot and thirsty during that trek through the mountains, wondering how anything could possibly live here, even though he knew it did. Now he was on the *other* side, thinking with amusement how crazy that seemed. He felt no discomfort in the desert, he was adapted well, as were all his kind. It felt strange to think that this desert had ever been lonely to him. It was abound with secret life! It meant everything to him.

Why, he wondered, were these thoughts pestering him now? For as long as he had been a Hawk, he had never once thought of that past existence. Over the past two seasons, it had seemed to creep slowly in, becoming more and more vivid, and more taunting. Now it was an entire collection of memories, and it was interfering with his ability to think. Why? He shook his head, quickly, trying again to forget about it. He had a life to live!

Very soon, he knew, his young would fly, and they would need extra attention and care as they learned to hunt by watching Ishee and himself. They would experience the hardest part of their lives and gain complete independence.

With that subject to govern his thoughts, he dropped smoothly from the ledge he had been standing on, his outstretched wings bearing him aloft. He sailed out over the canyon easily, seeing the few green trees of the entire desert below, the Owyhee river providing for all. The dark shadows of the canyon shortened as the sun rose, giving light to the river valley.

It was another day begun, in search of food for his young, but always in such an ingenuous manner that it was a pleasure; a kind of great gladness that would remain with him, for as long as he remained untouched, untamed, and free. For as long as he was a wild bird.

Life went on among the desert creatures. The extreme heat of the desert was beginning to subside, the cool nights, strong breezes, and shorter days an indication of the passing year.

Soon it would be winter in the desert, and they would begin their journey south: a few days of flying to escape the unwanted snow. Although it was quite possible to remain year round (the desert was never too cold for Hawk or Isheee), it was easier to find food without a blanket of snow covering the ground.

Many days had passed, and his concerns were only of his family now. His three youngsters were ready to fly; they had been exploring the perimeter of the ledge for some time. Originally, it had been built in a tree below in the canyon, but since large cats were known to hunt the region, it had been moved to the cliff face. In that manner, it most resembled the eyrie of a Golden Eagle. In fact, there were a few of those Eagles around, and it was a great feeling to be a relative to them. They still fascinated him, even though he knew them far better than ever before. During some of the harder times, they had shared much of their territory with each other. The larger prey of the Eagles was in more abundance in their region, while some of the smaller prey could be found in the Eagle's territory. Often, they would share the same canyon ledges and the same flying area. Sometimes it seemed threatening, his territorial instincts urging against it; but they both knew it was the only way. That had only happened one year, when the weather had been harsh, and everything had been affected. At any rate, the desert was an unpredictable source of challenges.

Soon came a morning when his young seemed more eager than ever to take the final step and soar off the ledge. The location of the nest would make a perfect place for them to learn from. There was a special atmosphere about the desert. It seemed cooler than it had been, and the wind was gently blowing.

Areec was perched on the extreme edge of the rock shelf, peering tentatively down into the canyon. He looked as though he wanted to try it, but could not quite gather the courage. Eventually, he would be compelled to the air; it was in his blood.

Kri-Kli and Shreee also peered over the edge often, but would retreat back to the nest, evidently more cautious about the idea of flying.

As the day wore on, he and Isheee made it a point to be gone from the area more often. Now that the young were ready to fledge, it was important that they understood there was more to the world than that cliff. They would soon be drawn to that freedom—partly in pursuit of their parents, partly because of their own great desire to be independent. Having their parents gone more often was an incentive for them to take off.

This was a critical time in their lives, in which they would have to begin to provide for themselves, learn to fly, hunt, and deal with the elements. It would take about a month for them to even be mediocre hunters, then they would go south and finish learning the skills they would need to survive.

He watched them as they frantically paced the ledge, unsure if they should attempt it. Isheee returned from her hunting, and gave a lizard she had caught to the three, who ate it ravenously.

As Hawk had predicted, Areee made the effort and glided shakily from the nest on unsteady wings early that morning. It happened while he was just returning himself, with another small meal for them. Just as he circled over the canyon, Areee became airborne. With uncertain, but level flight, Areee flapped in a circle, and landed awkwardly on another ledge.

Isheee seemed proud, taking off to watch them from the air. Hawk was also impressed. He left Kri-Kli and Shreee with the mouse he had caught, and joined Isheee, circling above.

Soon Areee gave it another try, and succeeded in climbing out of the canyon to land in a twisted, dry tree.

Remarkably, all three of them fledged that day. Shreee was hesitant, but followed Areee soon after his first flight. It wasn't until that afternoon that Kri-Kli finally flew.

Soon all five Hawks were circling in the dry desert air, the young discovering how to maneuver themselves in the ever-changing air currents. Shreee nearly collided with the cliff wall when returning to the nest one time. She barely slid to a stop on the ledge before she bumped into the rock. Kri-Kli was not a good

soarer yet, but he had the landing part down well. Areee, always trying to be the best with unrpvoen skills, ran into Isheee in the middle of a glide. Isheee seemed not to notice. After all, he was trying to get his accuracy up!

All in all, the three of them created an amusing trio, trying to mimic what they had seen their parents do for so long.

Many more days passed, and the fledglings were beginning to hunt. Often they missed their prey; they weren't coordinated or precise enough with their attack, but given time, they would greatly improve.

As the month expired and the air got colder, Hawk realized that it was fast approaching migration time. Because he had additional plans, part of him was excited yet part of him was terrified.

As he watched his three young settle down for the night, he reminisced about his own explorations of freedom. Only six migrations ago, he, too, had been an inexperienced fledgling. His first attempt at flying had been difficult as well. He remembered seeing his father looking over him as he crash landed at his feet. He had had an interesting past, if not a completely bizarre one.

His life was *so different* now. Before, he had been human, and could only have speculated on what this would be like. Now he knew, with slight amazement, what both sides were like. He had to admit, there were things he missed from the old human environment he had once known. Things like music, and hot showers, and air conditioning. He missed them some, yes, but he would never trade back for it; he hardly needed them now. He had the desert music, the river, and feathers.

He wondered again what his friends were doing right now. What had become of them? How would they react to him?

As night fell, he slept in nervous anticipation of the upcoming venture back into the world he had once known. It wouldn't be easy, but his curiosity simply had to be satisfied, once and for all.

Chapter 10

Impossible Reality

Jared pressed his thumb to a metal plate on his briefcase. It scanned his print and popped open with a click. He put a copy of a news article in the top half, along with a picture and some other writus sheets in a folder.

Jenny came over to him and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. He looked up, pausing with a shirt in his hands.

“How long are you going to be gone?” she asked.

“Two days,” he said quietly, “I’ll be back Wednesday morning, I hope. I just have to be there long enough to see that place for myself.”

“You really think you know something they don’t?”

“Yes. All I can hope is that they didn’t mess it all up...”

Jenny was silent. She knew that Jared was embarking on a hopeless search, but she also knew it was for his own interest.

“Look, it’s not that big of a deal,” Jared told her. He shrugged, “At least I’ll be getting away from the studio for a little while. I think the crew can handle a day filming in the mountains without me.”

“Well, that’s good,” she helped him fill his briefcase, then left the room on her own business.

A soft tone vibrated through the house, and a moment later, Jenny reappeared. “It’s for you, Jared,” she said from the doorway.

He dropped a Wrist-Top/RISC rechargeable battery into the case, and walked over to the bedroom videophone terminal, and pressed the ‘accept call’ button. A picture of a rather old, mean-faced secretary came on.

“Mr. Buttars, I presume?” she asked.

“Yah,” Jared said shortly.

“I’m calling with regard to your phone bill this month...”

“Are my bills not forwarded to the ButtarsVision offices?”

“Well, yes,” she said, looking at a screen, “but were you aware that there were two hundred and fifty dollars worth of calls made on long distance lines?”

“No, I wasn’t. Where did that come from?” he asked, genuinely interested.

“It seems that one or more of your children have been placing data calls to out of state locations, including one to Canada.”

“Hmm,” Jared grabbed a pencil and began tossing it with one hand. “I’ll look into that, thank you.”

“Thank you, Sir. DataWest Communications is happy to serve you, as always. Goodbye.”

The screen went black as he looked up at Jenny, who was still standing in the doorway, curious.

“Looks like Steve’s been busy this month,” Jared observed.

“Well, I knew that if you got him a 15.5 megabaud modem he would rack up the charges.”

“Yeah, but not long distance,” Jared said. “But,” he paused, “a kid needs an outlet.”

Jenny shrugged and asked, “What do you want to do about it?”

Jared cocked his head, “I don’t care. Just tell him not to download anything I wouldn’t approve of, all right?”

“All right.”

She turned and walked down the hallway while Jared went back to the bed where his briefcase lay open. He set his Wrist-Top computer in it, and shut the lid. He set the small case on the floor and entered his study to write a good old fashioned letter.

He pulled a smooth piece of writus from a tray and began writing the date on the top with a fine pen.

“Jared,” his wife called over a vidcom, “dinner will be ready in twenty minutes.”

“Okay,” he said.

She paused, seeing his determined concentration. “You’re pretty concerned about them, aren’t you?”

Jared sighed and looked up at the monitor. “I guess I am, aren’t I?”

She nodded.

“Well,” he went on, “I just have to know, that’s all.”

She smiled at him, realizing how important the idea of a reunion was to him, then clicked off the vidcom.

Jared bent over the letter, trying to think of what to write...

Dear Jamie,

How have you been doing these past many years? It was only recently that I was able to locate you through the HAM Radio club you have organized. I was quite glad to see that you were still around and doing things in this area.

So how are you! It is sure great to finally have found you. I wasn't able to find a videophone number to your address, but this letter will do, I think. What I have in mind is a kind of get-together for us and the other Jared, if I can find him. It has been so long that I think we needed to see each other again.

As you probably know, Jared turned up missing nearly six years ago. I was too dumbfounded to even consider investigating it further, but now I believe I may have an insight to his disappearance.

It's very important that we meet again, so please find some time to repsond.

I am planning on trying to meet later next month, so contact me if you can. If not, try to come on September 24; that's when I will have enough time off to spend on a long vacation with you guys. I appreciate it, and... how does it go again? Seventy-threes or something?

Your true friend,
Jared B.

Jared studied the letter and finally decided it was the way he wanted. He scanned it into his computer, and uploaded it to the local mail distribution center.

“Ninety-six cents deducted from postal account,” came a quiet voice recording.

Jared stood up and stretched. He had done too much in the past few days. His film was becoming a hectic, unmanageable event, but he knew Marshall would have everything under control while he was gone.

Then again... he thought. He punched in a code on the videophone and got an answer from the other end.

“Buttars residence, James you’re watching,” said the stocky red-haired man on the screen.

“Hey, James.”

“Oh, hello, Beavis,” James said without hesitation, “what do you want from me?”

“Hey. Listen, you know I’m going to be gone for a couple of days from the production, right?”

“Uh huh.”

“Well, I need you to keep an eye on things. You know how I run things; well, Marshall is supposed to be filling in for me, but I’d appreciate it if you would just kind of make sure he doesn’t screw up.”

“Sure. No problem, at least, not if there’s a bonus in it for me,” James hinted.

Jared gave him a dark look. “No, James, you gotta *earn* a raise first.”

“Darn,” he managed with a wry smile.

“But I’ll think about it. Thanks, Bro.”

“No problem. Anything else?”

“Nope. I’ll see you in two days.”

“Okay, bye.”

Jared terminated the connection and hastily turned out the lights in his bedroom. Enough already! He walked through the main hall and entered the dining room. Three of his children were seated around the table, talking about his movie.

“Did you see the Finks?” asked Greg, sitting at a far end.

“That’s *Sphinx*,” Synthia corrected her ten year old brother. “It was pretty great, huh?”

“Yeah,” Greg agreed.

“I like the Unicorn,” said Jenny, the thirteen year old.

“Hi Daddy,” Synthia greeted him as he came in.

“Where’s everyone else?” Jared asked.

“Tyler’s helping mom,” Greg informed him.

Jared smiled at his kids, then sat down as Monica entered the room. She was Synthia’s twin sister, but not identical.

“Hi Monica,” Jared pulled lightly at her long hair.

“Hi Dad,” she said, finding a seat at the table. “When are we going to get to see the animals in the mountains?”

Jared shook his head, “Not until we’re finished. That part is a big secret.”

Monica started to complain, but Synthia chimed in over her, “How did you make the Sphinx?”

“Well,” Jared set his glasses in front of him, rubbing the top of his nose, “It has a frame of aluminum and plastic, kind of like a skeleton, then we put a covering over it, and add some clay and paint it. Lots of work.”

“Neat!” Greg exclaimed, his eyes shining.

Jared paused for a few moments, his kids watching him in silence. He looked up at his frail ten-year old. “You’ve put on some weight, haven’t you?”

Greg smiled, “Not much,” he said. He had been born small, and had never reached his potential. He was rather little compared to his friends at school. Yet he seemed to have perfect health, and that was what really mattered.

Tyler came in carrying a dish with lasagna, followed by Jenny with a bowl full of popcorn and some mashed potatoes.

“Looks good, doesn’t it, Tyler?” Jared asked, eyeing the popcorn.

Tyler nodded, setting the dish on the table and finding a chair for himself.

The family began eating and discussing current events, but Jared contributed little. He began to get lost in his thoughts. Old times and past events circulated through his mind endlessly.

He ate slowly and meticulously, and soon remained the last one at the table. The rest of his family had disappeared to their own evening concerns. Jenny was clearing the table when she noticed her husband poking about with a fork in the last bit of pasta on his plate.

“Honey,” she said, leaning down near him. “You’ve got to lighten up. You’re letting this thing bother you too much.”

Jared looked up, realizing she was right. But still, he wasn’t one to just forget about something. Tomorrow he would be just as intent on the reunion. He *had* to know!

“Mmm,” he replied.

“Ahh,” she sighed as she sat down on the edge of the table and wrapped an arm around Jared’s shoulders. “Life can be so strange, can’t it?”

Jared moved an arm from its solemn position in his lap and placed it around her. “Yeah,” he said weakly.

“You have to just let things go as they’re supposed to. You can’t change anything...” She grew silent, looking distantly into her husband’s eyes. He looked back with affection, loving her with all his heart.

She found his hand as he stood up, and they finished clearing the table, turned off the lights and went to bed.

Jared awoke with bits of sunlight penetrating his eyelids. The day smelled fresh and new. He rose and stretched, pausing to check his surroundings. His familiar bedroom clean and open. The covers on Jenny’s side of the bed were turned back since she was already up and about.

He yawned and realized with a sort of relief that he didn’t have to be a director for a day. He got out of bed and got dressed. He put on one of his best suits and looked in the mirror. Staring back at him was one of the most successful filmmakers of all time. He smiled and thought about his friends, remembering how so long ago they had all participated in making home videos. Where had they lost track of each other? Things happened so fast; he simply couldn't remember.

He turned and walked down the long hallway to his study. He pressed a button his the videophone and a moment later the face of an middle-aged man appeared.

"Is the ButtarsVision jet fueled and ready to go?" Jared asked.

"Sure is, Boss," the man smiled and waved his hands to the airstrip behind him.

"Thanks, Rod. I'll be at the studios in about an hour."

He nodded and the image disappeared from the screen.

Jared picked up his breifcase, paused to toss his favorite pencil a couple of times, then left the room.

He glanced around the front rooms of the house, but they appeared unoccupied.

"See you, Hon!" he hollered loudly.

After a moment, the response drifted down the oak staircase, "Love you, goodbye!"

With that, he stepped out into the bright sunlight on his porch. The bright blue sky and fluffy clouds were perfect. He took a deep breath and looked around for Princess. She was not in sight, but probably out back.

He meandered to his garage and looked over the selection of cars he kept there. His stretched BMW, mainly for business use; a small white Ford Probe, for leisure drives; a Volvo i30 Trooper, his huge van for family outings; a couple of Mercedes (for the kids); and a Dodge Gremlin II, his rock-solid pickup truck for hauling things and going off the beaten track. He noticed the shiny new coat of wax each of them had. Perhaps he should consider giving Chad a raise, after all.

He got into his aging Ford Probe and started the engine smoothly. Of all his cars, he like this one best because it was from when he was just starting his career. It reminded him of the way things used to be. Which was not to say he didn't like the way things were now, just that the old days were good, too.

He backed out slowly and drove down the shady driveway. He passed the marble pillars and bid silent farewell to his estate. He would be back soon, no worries.

The drive through Logatropolis was refreshing. It had been a while since he had driven. Usually he had Chad take him almost everywhere, but he needed time alone.

Pedestrians smiled and waved to him when they realized who he was. He waved back, but tried not to be too conspicuous. In a way, he had more influence and prestige than did the mayor herself, but he was careful how he used it. He tried to appear normal and hardworking. Indeed, he was; he spent much of his hours doing routine tasks at ButtarsVision personally, he didn't believe in hiring slaves.

It was a short drive to ButtarsVision. In a way, despite his plans, all roads seemed to lead to it. Of course, it was hard to

avoid it. It took up nearly three square miles (1920 acres). The complex consisted of studios, office towers, sound stages, storage facilities, shops and construction buildings, computer complexes, parking areas, and the visitors center with its rides and attractions, to name a few. Today he was going to the airport section of the complex. A few private jets and small planes were necessary in the world of film, and not just for great aerial shots. Many notable personalities had traveled to ButtarsVision on these jets.

He turned into the appropriate entrance and circled around to the parking tower. A reserved parking spot was there waiting for him. He got out and met Rod at the landing strip.

"Ready to go, Boss?"

"Sure am. Great day for flying, huh?"

Rod smiled and began walking toward a sleek black jet situated at one end of the runway. The climbed aboard and some assistants removed the ladder. Rod took his seat at the pilot's chair while Jared was content to ride in the comfortable seats in the passenger area. He fastened himself in for takeoff and picked up a magazine while Rod got clearance from the tower. The magazine was a complimentary one from ButtarsVision Air, with lots of kinds interesting articles, but mostly they were about movies. He hadn't had a chance to read it yet.

The engines started and the jet began to smoothly accelerate as Jared leafed through the pages. But his mind was somewhere else. He realized with a choking feeling that it was possible he might never see his friend again. For the trillionth time, he cursed himself for letting things go for so long. In a way he felt it was his fault because he was supposed to be the big leader. He was the one responsible for countless decisions. He should have been the one to keep them together. But with all the responsibilities that came with becoming successful, he supposed it must have slipped through the framework somewhere. He was determined to find some answers, regardless of the effort.

"We're clear," Rod informed him.

Jared hadn't even felt the gain in altitude. He'd flown so often in his jet it was hardly noticeable. He took of his seatbelt and

opened his briefcase to browse the various bits and pieces he had collected.

"We'll be arriving in Portland in approximately one hour. Please feel free to roam about. Enjoy your flight!" Rod announced, using his best commercial pilot's voice.

"Oh, knock it off Rod," Jared said sarcastically, half smiling.

"Something wrong?" Rod asked.

"Oh, not really. I'm just doing some research."

"Sounds like fun."

"I hope it winds up that way," Jared looked up to see the first few clouds approaching eye level.

"Whatever. Hey, if you're hungry there's some stuff left over from a flight yesterday."

That piqued Jared's interest. "Thanks."

He set the briefcase down and got up to browse the snack bar. There were some sandwich ingredients and cookies. He helped himself to a hearty breakfast and ate in silence.

The remainder of the flight was uneventful. It wasn't very long before he saw the dark green forests of western Oregon through his window. He joined Rod in the cockpit to watch their landing at Portland International Airport. The jet touched down and landed perfectly.

"You're getting a little rusty there, aren't you, Rod?" Jared taunted his brother.

"That landing had a better rating than your movies!"

They laughed and waited for their turn to taxi from the runway.

"See you here Wednesday morning, then?" Jared asked as they approached the terminal.

"Sure thing, Boss."

They took care of their airport business as the jet was moved to a private hangar, then split up at the exit. Jared's rental car, a blue Buick Rio was waiting for him in the short term parking. It wasn't as exciting as his other vehicles, but it would do. Besides, he wanted to be inconspicuous.

Leaving the airport, he stopped to check his directions on a travel map. The Center for Avian Research was just west of the zoo. He was headed in the right direction.

The streets in Portland took him there in due course. It was situated on a large plot of land, with magnificent fountains and bird sculptures lining the main entrance walk. Great tall trees were so thick as to be a forest on either side of the building. It appeared by all rights to be a bird heaven.

He found a parking spot and approached with a great measure of respect. His most demanding ideas had not conjured a place as great as this. He wasn't convinced he would be able to find anything, especially after such a long time, but he was definitely going to give it a try.

He entered the lobby and a secretary greeted him with a warm smile. "Can I help you?"

"Yes," Jared stepped closer to the desk, "I am doing some follow-up research on the disappearance of Doctor Yelton."

The secretary nodded and stood up quietly. "I see. Well, we have a visitor's center with more information if you would like to see it."

"Yes, that would be great," Jared felt more at ease, looking around the building to see what looked like a cross between a hospital and a college.

"Just follow me," she said, and began walking towards a large hallway.

Jared was surprised that someone else hadn't come to escort him, but reminded himself that as impressive as it was, it was still a much smaller establishment than Buttar's Vision.

They came abruptly to a series of display cases, all of which showed numerous awards, plaques, and trophies. Framed letters from bird scientists around the world, photographs of Hawks and Eagles, and color brochures about Avian Research progress filled the shelves.

"He was quite a man," the secretary said, indicating the displays. "He worked incredibly hard. It was like life and death to him."

"What do you mean?" asked Jared.

"Well, it was beyond 'work.' It was as though the entire field was his life. Indeed it was: He never married and had no nearby relatives; but he was so focused—too focused. Sometimes I think it caused him great stress."

"Like if something wouldn't work?"

"Exactly," she nodded and smiled again. She started to walk slowly forward and continued her story: "His interest in birds started early in his teenage years. He volunteered for raptor conservationist groups and even took to rehabilitation for a time."

"I remember those days," Jared said, reminiscing.

"You knew him?"

"Yes, we were high-school friends."

"Incredible," she paused and sighed, then continued: "Some of his hobbies included photography and writing," she waved her hands to indicate the room about them.

They stopped in another room with framed portraits of raptors. Cedar paneling gave it an earthy feel and old-fashioned incandescent lighting added a warm touch. A bookshelf lined one wall, filled with miniature carvings and a few books.

Jared looked around at the beautiful images. "These are all his work?" he asked.

"Yes, he wasn't a successful photographer until later in life, but these are pictures from all periods of time in his career."

Jared didn't see the one that had appeared in the video. He was about to inquire when the secretary continued: "He also loved technology. In many of his writings he said it was like an unstoppable force. It was devastating and dangerous to the ecological aspect of things, but since it was so powerful it might as well be put to use."

Jared laughed. "Yeah, he was a computer nut."

The next room they entered had a mock-up of his home as it had been. An old computer sat lonely at a wooden desk. The secretary leaned against the far wall. "He put it to use, too. We use some of the newest supercomputers to design and test our medical formulas. With his original ideas we were able to develop and perfect some of the most basic concepts in avian science today."

Jared could feel a connection in that the film industry was similarly built upon concepts he had pioneered. "What about those last few months before he vanished?"

"Well, he had always been engrossed in his work here, but never so much as during the last year or so before the tragedy. Sometimes the morning staff would find him asleep in his office or in the lounge. He had to hire some senior managers because he was so busy with a project he would say nothing about."

"Hmm," Jared mused.

"Well, it was like that for quite a while. Then suddenly 'Poof!' He was gone and the media was crawling all over the place."

"No notice or weird messages or anything?"

"Nope. Well, just what everyone saw on the news. That strange empty vial. Oh, but there was something else. A brilliant new serum to aid in the healing of avian bones was completed the night of his disappearance—by him. It was something we had been working on for years. We guess that was what he had become so firmly embedded in. But it's my personal feeling there was something else; something to do with his departure."

"Is his office still here?"

"Oh, yes. We have built new offices and left it pretty much the way it was ever since. In fact, it's just down here," she said, walking a bit further down the hall.

Jared followed silently. He started to feel strange with so many reminders of his friend surrounding him. Above the desk with the computer had been a picture of their last reunion. When ButtarsVision had reached number one, they'd celebrated in Logatropolis with a get-together.

Shortly, they entered a cozy office. Bookshelves lined the walls, filled with all kinds of ornithological journals and books. A long wooden desk sat directly in the middle of the room, supporting only a small wooden eagle statue, a nameplate, and a miniature bird's nest. One of the first things Jared noticed as he came in was the pictures hanging behind the desk. The one of the Red-tailed Hawk to the left.

Almost with intuition, the secretary explained, "The Red-tailed Hawk was his favorite bird of prey. The one on the right, Sky, was a bird he housed for education in the 1990's.

"This office was where he spent most of his time. Usually reading or thinking of ideas or theories. He also wrote letters and handled the Center's business here."

Jared set his briefcase on the desk, feeling somewhat excited and nervous. The secretary seemed wary but watched with curiosity as he opened it and produced a photograph.

"Do you know what this was?" he asked, handing the photo to her.

She looked at it and handed it back. "Yes, he had a safe behind that picture and kept some of his personal things in it. The detectives told us that the vial's case had been stored there."

"So it was something of a big secret."

"Yes, I suppose you could say that," she started to seem a bit disconcerted. "Why?"

"Well, when I saw this I thought it might give some answers."

"Like what?"

"Is that safe still there?"

"Why, yes," she approached the left picture and swung it out on its hinges. "We've never locked it," she explained as she opened the steel grey safe. Inside, sitting alone on the shelf, was a single rust-colored tail feather.

"That's what I thought it was," Jared thought aloud.

"What?" the secretary asked, interested.

"A feather. The one in this picture."

"I don't understand," she looked distracted.

"Well, it's one I recognize. A Red-tailed Hawk tail feather—but not just any one. See that little line where it's missing some of the, uh..."

"Vane?"

"Yes. I remember it as one he caught."

"Now this is something I've never heard," she huffed. "He *caught* it?"

"Yes, near where he lived. The birds had their nest in nearby trees and he watched them often. One day when one of them

took flight during moult, one of its feathers came spinning down. He ran underneath and caught it before it touched the ground. I remember him telling me about it all the time," Jared smiled a satisfactory smile.

"You look familiar," the secretary said, "do I know you?" It was as if she had looked at him for the first time.

"I'm Jared Buttars. I'm just an old friend of his."

"The *ButtarsVision* Buttars?"

"Yes."

"Oh dear. I didn't realize..."

Jared held up a hand. "Look, I appreciate your time. Thanks for everything." He put the photo away and gathered up his things.

"Yes, certainly."

They walked toward the entrance and Jared left as quickly as he had come. His suspicions had been confirmed. In a way he felt relieved to know that his friend simply hadn't died or vanished. In another he felt a strange grinning joy for his friend. And in another he felt deep sorrow to know he would never see him again.

"*This feather,*" his friend had said long ago, "*is magic.*"

Chapter 11

Return

Bob stepped forward and examined the old truck. "I thought ya' said you was stuck, Mate?"

"We were."

"Well, look there." Bob pointed to the tires. "Ain't stuck."

Jamie bent down and examined the dirt-encrusted wheels. It looked as though the truck had been pulled out of the mudhole. "I don't understand," he sighed, but with relief.

"What's this?" Bob was looking at a large sticker on the driver's window.

Jamie came over and read the notice: "Thank you for enlisting the services of Logatropolis Rescue and Emergency. We hope our efforts were able to provide you the quality you deserve. Your team leader was *S. Rickle*." It was signed with a scrawly handwriting.

"Well I'll be..." Jamie smiled triumphantly. "They came after all! I wonder if they fixed the truck, too."

"Huh?" Bob asked.

Jamie got in and popped the hood. He walked around to the engine and peered around. He couldn't tell if anything was wrong or not.

"Bob? I mean, Mick?"

"Yeah?"

"Come take a look, maybe you can tell me if it's fixed."

Bob strode over and peered at the metal contraption. "Well," he mused, "I dunno."

"Wait a second, what was I thinking? I'll just see if it starts up." Jamie scampered back to the driver's side and got in.

Bob was fascinated by the hoses and belts he found inside Jamie's transportation device. He stood there with a look of excitement on his face.

"Now this 'ere is one beast I could never tame! I'll bet..."

But Bob stopped short as Jamie turned the key and the engine came to life. Jamie's face lit up with pleasure and he motioned for Bob to get inside.

"Woa..." Bob started to say, but just then Jamie slammed his door shut and the hood came down and hit Bob square in the head. He collapsed onto the road with a thud.

"Ahhhh!" Jamie shouted and jumped out to help him.

"I'm okay, I'm okay!" Bob said wearily, rubbing his forehead.

"Are you sure?" Jamie asked.

"Yes, quite sure." He looked about and seemed at ease.

"Okay then, let's go and get that repeater installed!"

"Repeaters?"

Jamie shuddered and realized Bob, er Mick, wouldn't know anything about them.

"Drat!" he stomped his foot and leaned against the frame of the truck.

"I'd love to!" Bob exclaimed. "Practically invented the things!"

"What?" It was Jamie's turn to be surprised.

"What are we waiting for?" Bob asked, climbing into the truck.

"I don't know..." Jamie started, but trailed off as he followed Bob. He put the truck in gear and started once again up the mountain.

"What did you say your name was?" Bob asked Jamie.

"Jamie. Who are you now?" he said, not taking his eyes off the road.

"Oh, Jamies. I think I know you."

Bob's accent was starting to sound familiar.

"I am Mikkos."

Of all the people in the world to help with the repeater installation, none could be better than Mikko.

"Mikko!" was all he could manage. He stepped harder on the accelerator and hurried to the repeater site. He didn't want Bob to change before they got there!

They talked of power transistors and RS-232 interfaces; watt-ages and links. Jamie's nightmare adventure had just been touched by a miracle.

The site loomed just ahead and soon the two were unloading repeater parts and hauling them into the tiny building.

With Mikko's help, it only took Jamie an hour to put the new radio into operation. They tested it and decided that everything was working perfectly. Jamie hadn't felt so good in years.

They left the site with happiness and starting making their way back towards the city. As glad Jamie was the repeater was up, he wanted nothing more than to get back to the comforts of four walls and indoor plumbing.

Mikko's personality faded from Bob at some point, and he became himself once again—for the first time since they had started the trip. Jamie no longer felt anger towards him. A working repeater had a way of washing those feelings away.

After a while they came to a fork in the road, and Jamie stopped. He was confused; the rain had changed the appearance of the roads and the usual sign labelling the roads had fallen over. He had no idea which way to go.

"Bob?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you remember which way we came up?"

"I wish I did, Jamie. I wish I did."

"Hmm. Well, no use arguing about it. Let's just take that one," he said, pointing to the left.

"Okay."

And so they continued down the mountain. The road did not seem difficult or unfamiliar. Jamie was confident that they had picked the right path.

Suddenly he stopped again, straining his eyes to see ahead.

"What is it?" Bob asked.

"I'm not sure, but..."

Whatever it was began to appear bigger. Slowly but surely, it was approaching. Jamie sat frozen in the driver's seat. With a sort of remembrance of childhood stories, he realized as he saw the deep red scales and the menacing teeth, that the beast coming towards them could only be a dragon.

"It's a dragon!" Bob yelled, starting to get out of the truck.

"Run!" Jamie fumbled for the door handle. He slipped and fell onto the road just as a fiery burst of flame came from the dragon's mouth.

"Ahhh!" he screamed, getting to his feet. He was quick to follow Bob's lead and start running up the road. Shortly, he passed the old man and was starting to feel safe when out from the trees came a second beast. He tripped and started crawling on his knees.

"Help!" he gasped.

The monster eyed him suspiciously and started to make its way toward him. It had deep crimson eyes and a huge beak like an eagle. Black feathers covered the top half of its body, completed with the hindquarters of a giant lion.

Bob came up behind Jamie and stopped dead in his tracks.

"I didn't know Gryphons lived in the Mt. Steven forest..." he noted in fear.

Jamie looked up to see a pair of penetrating eyes staring deep into his heart. He started to wince, anticipating beak or claw to shred him at any moment, but instead the creature simply froze.

"What?" Jamie wheezed.

"Cut! Cut! What the hell?" a voice yelled.

Bob and Jamie looked around. A man stepped out of the trees holding a megaphone and a bottle of Diet Coke.

"Who are you?" he asked. Before they could reply, "What are you doing here?"

"We just finished installing..." Bob started, but was cut off again by the man.

"Nevermind. I don't care what you're doing. You were just leaving, right?" he said, more of a demand than a question.

"Uhh, right!" Jamie agreed, standing up.

A few other people stepped from the thick foliage, and above the trees a camera floated upward on a crane lift.

Jamie suddenly realized he was smack in the middle of a ButtarsVision filming session. He had heard about it on the news.

"Let's go, Bob," he said, tugging on Bob's shirt.

They walked back to the truck, more than a little shaken. The dragon hovered over his pickup like an angry predator.

Jamie found a wide spot and backed up to turn around.

"Sorry!" he called to the director.

"Yeah, yeah, just git goin'!" the man yelled back, pausing to take a lengthy drink. "Get them back in position," he barked to the crew behind him.

Jamie steered carefully around the Gryphon as it started to retreat into the forest. His knuckles were white as he gripped the wheel.

They found the fork again and went down the other road this time. After a while Bob started to laugh hysterically. Soon, Jamie chimed in and their moods improved once again.

"A dragon! You actually thought it was a real dragon!" Bob chided him.

"No, I knew it was a prop. I just acted that way because I thought I might get on camera."

"Yeah, right," Bob poked him in the shoulder.

The cityscape of Logatropolis manifested ahead of them, and Jamie knew he was home.

He dropped Bob off at his house and located his own home by the antenna farm atop its roof.

"I was so worried!" Jasmine cried as he came in from the garage.

"I'm sorry! We got stuck, then Bob got lost and we had to spend the night out there."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"How was I supposed to?" he asked, holding up his hands.

"One word: Radio!" Jasmine glared at him.

"Oh," he said sheepishly.

"It's all right," she said, giving him a big hug. "Look, let's all go out to eat and talk about it."

They packed into a van and headed into the heart of Logatropolis. With the highest ratio of restaurants to population in the world, they were sure to find a good place to eat. Finally, they picked Jamie's favorite, a Japanese restaurant. It was the first good meal Jamie had had in a long time.

He smiled at his wife and children and thought how nice it was to be home.

The next morning, Jamie had trouble getting up for work. His muscles ached and he felt as though he had been in a plane crash. But there was no help for it. His family needed his income and he wasn't about to disappoint them.

He ate breakfast and offered the calendar a disgusted look. It was Monday. He took a short shower (an hour) and attended to some of his cuts and bruises. Finally he went out the door and got once again into his faithful truck. When it started without any problem, he was again reminded of the great service the Rescue and Emergency team had done. Of course, it would show up on his next Logatropolis Residence bill. But he was nevertheless grateful.

He drove to work in a silent mood. He was monitoring the new repeater, but no one was using it. Such was the way with many repeaters these days. It seemed like everyone was switching to that new TennaWave stuff. Ten times faster than radio? Hah! He'd believe it when he saw it. And that meant he never had to accept it, because everyone knew you couldn't see tenna waves!

He laughed about it and pulled into the Logatropolis Police Department Headquarters. He reported in and talked with some of the officers about the weekend. A few of them shared his interest in radio, but none were as enthusiastic about it as he.

He went out to the parking garage and waited. It wasn't long before an older police car pulled up and a tired officer got out. He grabbed a coat and a clipboard from the car and turned to Jamie.

"It's all yours," he said and entered the building.

Jamie's eyes got wide and he stepped over the the vehicle.

The officer peered from the doorway again. "Jamie?"

Jamie turned to listen.

"Check the light panel too, something's funny with it."

"Sure thing, Ned."

Jamie set to work on the electrical systems of the car and found the problem. A wire had become loose and fallen too close to a hot part of the engine. He spliced the connection and bound the wire tightly where it was supposed to be, then went back into the office to attack the next problem.

"You fixed that TennaPhone in my patrol car, didn't you?" asked Barry, one of his best friends, coming into the office.

"Sure did. I had a little trouble with the audio sensitivity, but it should be working perfectly now."

"Thanks a lot, Jamie," he said, shaking his hand. Then to a dispatcher behind a desk, "Gotta be going now. I'll be 10-136."

Jamie looked out the window at Barry's Ford Knight. It was the most beautiful piece of machinery he had ever seen. Made especially for law enforcement, nothing could compare. It had more lights on it than Jamie's Christmas tree last year. And it had more decibels of sound packed into the system than some of his dad's own equipment. Ah yes, that was the life.

Jamie turned his attention back to a dispatcher's console, soldering connections and checking voltages. His duties at the police department never seemed to end.

He finished the day's projects and took a final break in the lounge before going home. Several officers were having doughnuts and coffee. He took a seat alone on a small table and had a small bowl of vanilla yogurt.

"Hey there, repeater man!" a voice called from the lounge entrance.

Jamie looked up and saw Shonn Rickle, the guy who had helped fix his truck. "Hi there, I was going to stop by and say thanks."

"No problem. Hey, that's my specialty. I love old trucks."

Jamie laughed but wished he had a nice new car, like the Knight.

"It was pretty beat up. We put a new oil pan on, and tuned it up a bit. Then the mud had dried up enough that we just drove it out and that was that," he explained, glowing with pride.

"You did a great job," Jamie said. "Runs fine."

"Thanks. Say, did you get that repeater put up okay?"

"Yeah, it's running fine."

"That guy you were with help ya?"

"Yeah. We got lost in the woods for a while, but we got it up there."

Shonn slapped the table. "I'll have to check it out."

"Yeah..." Jamie began.

Looking at his watch, Shonn hurriedly stood up. "I've got a date! I'd better be going."

"Okay," Jamie laughed.

Shonn left him to his thoughts. He sat for a while longer and considered the events of the day.

Maybe he had been meant to run into a ButtarsVision production crew. Maybe he needed to contact his friend and see how he was. But it might be hard with Jared so busy and distinguished.

One deliberation led to another, and he found himself thinking about a different Jared. Another friend of his, but as involved in birds as Buttars was in film. He wondered what he was up to.

He looked at a clock and realized he had better be going home. He left the lounge slowly and went to find his truck.

The evening traffic was mild and Jamie arrived at his house shortly.

"Hey everyone, I'm home!" he called from the door.

He greeted his children, Greg, Pat, Steve and Aurora as he put his jacket in the closet. The others were already asleep.

"Fix yourself some dinner," Jasmine's voice came from down the hall. "There's leftover tacos in the fridge."

Jamie heated up some food and drifted into the living room. He was more tired than usual; certainly the wilderness trek hadn't helped. On the other hand, maybe the exercise would pay off later.

The kids wandered off on their own business, they'd already had dinner.

He turned on the tennavision, and flipped through the hundred or so channels in search of a decent program. Nothing caught his attention, so he left it on an old movie channel. A commercial for old 90's music was blaring at him from the wall screen. He silenced it with a press of the mute button, and sat back to relax and enjoy his tacos.

"How was your day?" Jasmine asked, coming into the room. She was dressed in a red bathrobe and looked positively beautiful with her long, wet blonde hair.

"It was all right."

"That's too bad," she joked, sitting down in an adjacent chair.

They talked for a moment about how things were going at their workplaces. Jasmine worked at one of the local malls as a sales manager.

Soon the evening wore into the night and all the kids were sound asleep.

Jamie changed subjects, "Do you remember Jared Buttar's?"

"Does anyone *not* know him?" she giggled.

"No, I mean a long time ago. We used to hang out all the time together."

"Yeah, kind of."

"I ought to see how he's doing. It's been a while."

"Why sure. That Bob friend of yours—well, I don't think all of his biscuits are done, if you know what I mean."

"Oh, he just has a few problems, that's all," Jamie stood up for his old friend.

"But still, you should call him or something."

"Yeah," Jamie concluded, "maybe I should. But he's probably impossible to get a hold of."

"Never know until you try," she advised.

"If I ever get time!"

"Hmm," he sighed, thinking for a minute. "What about Hawkboy?"

"Jared Yelton?"

"Yeah. You remember him?"

"A little. Look, if it's important to you, you should get in touch with these friends of yours," she said, growing bored.

"Yeah," he agreed, and let the subject fade.

A familiar scene on the t.v. caught his eye, and he brought the volume up slightly.

It was a movie from the 90's. He couldn't remember the name of it, but the dinosaurs were considered top-notch graphic effects

back then. About some kind of a theme park where real dinosaurs lived, but something went wrong and they had to evacuate.

Jasmine started to say something and he muted it again, not particularly interested in the movie.

"I'll bet it was cold up in the mountains."

"Yeah," he agreed between bites of taco, rather missing the point.

"That must have been awful, almost drowning and then being stranded all alone in the forest," her voice was starting to take on a sarcastic tone.

"I still shiver when I think of that waterfall."

Jasmine got up and turned off the tennavision, not waiting for Jamie's approval.

"Um," he started.

"I'll bet you missed me," she said, leaning over to whisper something in his ear.

"I sure did," he said softly as she disappeared from the room.

He was done with his dinner and got up to rinse off the dishes. He brushed his teeth and got ready for bed.

Jasmine was already there, waiting for him.

Chapter 12

Travel

Kri-Kli, Areee, and Shreee were gone. Off on their own great adventure. So was Isheee, his mate of four years. The first cold night of migration was the longest. Getting into the routine of staying aloft in thermals and pushing southward was sometimes difficult. But as he slept that night in a dark tree, his instincts gnawed at him for being so stupid and deviating from the usual flyway. Isheee had seemed confused when he circled farther and farther away, but he was unafraid because he knew he would meet her again.

The ground Hawk was covering was barren and alien. It was rocky and offered very little in the way of food. So he went without food the first day and fluffed up his feathers for extra warmth. The bright moon comforted him as the silence permeated the night. Even though he was used to crickets and other night sounds, the dead quiet of this place was a nice change.

He watched a few quivering stars in the night sky and side-stepped closer to the trunk. He had never spent so much time thinking in his life; at least, not as a bird.

He viewed his secret past as a kind of dream, or fictional adventure. What worried him most was how these new thoughts and ideas would affect him. He retained his instinct and nature, but he couldn't remember ever having conscious thoughts such as these. Would he forget them after his venture into the human zoo? Or would he have to battle between instinct and reason forever? Would it help or hinder?

He squeezed his eyes shut tight as if to force the questions away. They were beginning to drive him crazy.

Isheee and the fledglings came back to his mind. What were they doing right now? Would the young make it through their

first year? Would Isheee be waiting for him when they returned next spring?

Mentally he reeled. So many questions! Never before had they been a concern of his. Now he was plagued by the unknown. If this new consciousness was going to leave, the sooner the better. If it were to stay, he was certain he would go mad.

The silence crept back and begged for more thoughts. He thought of Isheee and how beautiful she was. The way she looked when he first saw her: In her second year and inexperienced, like himself. The depths of her dark yellow eyes and the bold patterns on her chest and wings. Her fair voice. She meant a lot to him, and the simple fact of the matter was he never realized how much until now.

Sleep began finally to run its course, and with a jumbled cross between gratitude and fear, his eyes closed and he bid farewell to the storm raging in his mind. He pulled one foot up into his plumage and sank into a restful slumber.

A gentle wind came during the night, but unable to stir the hard earth, it tried instead to penetrate the warmth beyond his feather shield. But it failed at that, too, and died slowly as the sun's first light spattered the ground.

The day warmed slowly. Judging from the clouds and several other factors he couldn't identify—only felt—it was going to be a poor day for travel. The thermals would not be nearly as strong. That was not to his advantage, especially considering he was guessing that he was even going in the right direction. He was heading as much east as he was south.

There was no help for it, and soon his stomach rumbled with an intense frustration, reminding him of the sweet, savory taste of fulfilment.³ He stretched and preened for a moment before falling forward into a glide. The air was crisp and pulled heavy at his wings, but he flapped vigorously and was soon aloft on a weak pocket of warm air.

As he searched the ground with keen eyes, he became aware for the first time of his own flying. His demanding human curiosity

³ *Hunger* from **Selections of Nature**; Jared Yelton, January 1995.

analyzed it and studied it: It was more than a navigational or physical exercise. It was a literal bonding with the air. It was becoming part of something almost intangible but incredibly fluid. Every small movement—a turn of the head, a shift of the tail, a flick of the wingtip—meant a change in motion. Precision was the key, and he met the requirements easily. Flying was as natural as breathing—and as necessary. As if to make it all worthwhile, it simply felt good.

He spent a good deal of energy flying that morning, stretched out on the air as if it were a giant cushion. The rest of the world was forgotten, including his hunger—for a time. Concerns dissolved as he soared, feeling the winds carry him far away from his thoughts. All that mattered was freedom. Separation from earth and gravity. This was what life was about: Being so high in the sky you touch the clouds. Being able to climb and dive and fly. Being a Red-tailed Hawk.

Eventually, his hunger came back with renewed force, shifting his concentration from flying to hunting. He focused his powerful eyes on the dusty brown earth below. The ground retained its barren appearance, save for specks of hardy plant life. Nothing moved below. It was as if the thick clouds and bitter weather had deprived the land of all life.

Catching a tiny updraft along a broken ridge, he flew steadily southward, noting a definite change in the skies. They were growing darker and a few small drops of rain had begun to fall. Temporarily suppressing his body's demands for food, he pressed onward, taking advantage of a building tailwind from the storm.

The mountains passed by and the terrain remained unchanged. Nevertheless, he kept a sharp eye out for potential prey. Only twice did he see a twitch of movement, but no real opportunities arose. He soared on, unwilling to give up.

The rain finally caught up to him in full force and the wind changed direction slightly. It became difficult to fly parallel to the ridge, and soon after his feathers began to feel heavy with water it was apparent he would have to land for the night. Had the rain been light or short-lived, it might have been different; but it was a

steady downpour and darkness stretched well past the horizon. It was going to be a long night.

Trees were not readily available, but ahead he could see something that might do. The rain was falling in sheets, blurring everything in the distance, but as he neared a tall pole he realized there were many of them forming a line that extended forever in each direction. An ominous memory told of this as a human thing, but a quick search revealed no traces of any humans. Apparently, even they were smart enough to stay out of rough weather.

He silently wished there could have been something, anything, with more shelter than this. He was used to rocky outcroppings where the cliffs blocked some of the weather. But this would have to do. It wasn't as if he had never felt rain on his back.

Carefully, he touched down on the flat round top of the wood. He examined the strange perch and came to the conclusion that he was in the best spot: It didn't have any strange shaped things poking up like elsewhere on the pole.

It wasn't the first time he had encountered an unusual human contraption, but this was different. He perched silently for a minute, then realized the whole of it was vibrating. Ever so slightly, a strange, pulsating sensation started at his feet and shook its way to his head. Just enough to notice, but not so much he couldn't ignore it.

He roused his feathers and shook the droplets of water from himself, letting the feathers fall neatly back into place. It would have to rain for a very long time before he would be cold.

It rained for a very long time.

The morning brought with it a lazy sun and slow death for the storm. The ground was dark and covered with small puddles of water that refused to sink into the earth.

It had been a chill, restless night. He had endured much more severe weather, but still it was a tedious morning. His feathers were soaked, his stomach empty, and his mind inconveniently cluttered.

The sun rose well above the mountains before he was finished preening and replenishing the oil in his feathers. The clouds were

beginning to dissipate and the sun's warmth was just starting to reach him.

He spread his wings to catch as much sunlight as possible, speeding the drying process. It seemed the day would be considerably better—at least for flying. The menu below, however, still looked impossibly drab. This desert was beginning to convince him of its lifelessness.

Suddenly a motion caught his eye. It was faint and very far away, but something had moved.

He snapped his head around and watched with vicious intensity, and in less than a minute the stirring continued. It was a marmot, and a fat one at that.

He took off quickly and quietly. There was going to be no escape.

As he gained altitude to avoid being detected, he could see beyond the rocky slope where the marmot was. Sagebrush and dry grass lined the horizon and it looked as though the barren plain became habitable once again.

The marmot was scurrying along the base of the slope, evidently heading back to its rocky dwelling. They lived in groups, too, spreading word of danger not unlike the pikas.

But he saw no others. He was circling above the animal now, high enough to be hidden, low enough to stoop. He waited—circled once—the rockchuck stopped and turned away from the slope. The wind whistled shrilly as his dive increased speed. His luck was holding, it had moved away from the protection of the rocks. If it stayed there a moment more—just a few seconds—it would be an easy catch.

He closed in on it, and suddenly its ears twitched and it began running. But his luck had not yet run out. It miscalculated its direction and ran first away from the slope, then realizing where the danger was, turned to scramble for the rocks—but not fast enough. Before it had even returned to the place it had started from, his talons were upon its back.

In seconds it was over. The marmot was old and death came easily.

He ate greedily and quickly, carefully mantling his kill and keeping an eye on the sky. Other winged shapes started to appear, and he knew they would not hesitate to steal his prize.

The marmot was much bigger than what he could possibly eat, so when he had finished, he left with confidence that the remains would be finished by the others.

As he became airborne with heavy wingstrokes, a vulture glided effortlessly to the carcass and began its own noon meal. It didn't take long in the desert for the whereabouts of a fresh kill to be widely known.

He circled higher, finding a strong thermal and rising in its warm column.

With his mind off food for the first time in days, Hawk was reminded by the line of branchless trees the purpose of his unordinary venture. A realization came with it, that it would without a doubt lead him precisely to his destination.

So he circled higher and found a mountain ridge to travel above. Satisfied with a full crop, he stretched his wings as far as he could and flew silently toward his goal.